

FOR MEWAR

A STORY OF THE RAJPUTS

BY

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With Five Illustrations

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'NOW YOU ARE MY RAKHI-BAND BHAU'

PROLOGUE

The poets tell us that when Parasurama had destroyed the ancient Kshatriyas, the gods, seeing that men were as sheep without shepherds, repaired to Mount Abu to create a new fighting race. There, out of a cauldron of fire, sprung the four Agnikula tribes of Rajasthan. It is a fitting legend for the prelude to the fiery history of the Rajput states.

There are two other great groups of Rajput tribes, the Suryavansi (solar race) and the Chandravansi (lunar race). The tribes composing these three main groups are divided into a large number of clans.

The Middle Ages saw the rise of the Guhilots (Sesodias) of Mewar, whose headquarters was the great fortress of Chitor, the capital of Mewar for eight hundred years. Somewhat later we catch the first glimpse of the other great tribe of the Rathors, who are said to have come from Kanauj to found a kingdom in Marwar.

Udaipur (Sesodia), Jodhpur (Rathor), Jaipur (Kachwaha Chauhan) and Bundi (Hara Chauhan) were the four principal states of Rajasthan, from which most of the others have been derived, and the Maharana of Udaipur has long ranked as first among the ruling princes of India. The relations of the chiefs of the various clans in each state to the ruling prince were in some ways like those which existed under the feudal system in Europe.

From the eleventh to the twelfth century was the golden age of the culture and chivalry of Rajasthan—an age of fighting chiefs, each with his strong fort, of bards and poets, who frequented the courts of chiefs and princes, and celebrated their deeds in martial lays. In Rajasthan grew up a deep sense of loyalty and devotion to chief, and clan, which inspired in a warlike age so many

lofty courage. In their loyalty, their fiery ardour in war, and their tribal feuds, the Rajputs often remind us of the Highland clans of Scotland.

In the Rajput warriors the Mohammedan invaders found their most doughty opponents, from the days of Prithviraj in the twelfth century, the leader of Hindu resistance to Mohammed of Ghor, to those of Durgadas in the seventeenth, who led the Rathors against Aurangzeb. The two great sieges of Chitor, by Alau-d-din and by Akbar, are epics of Rajput heroism, and the gallant old Rana Sanga, with one eye and one arm, a crippled leg and the scars of eighty wounds, leading his army against Babar at Kanwaha, is a prototype of the Pratap Singh of this story.

Had the clans of Rajasthan combined in unbroken alliance, it was not likely that the Mogul Empire would ever have been established, for without the *lakh tarwar Rathoran* (the hundred thousand swords of the Rathors) Hindustan could never have been subdued.

But the field of Kanwaha was the last on which a Rajput confederation fought together, and Marwar had to stand alone against the armies of Akbar. In spite of Rathor gallantry, Udai Singh of Jodhpur had to acknowledge the supremacy of the Padshah. He gave his sister Jodh Bai in marriage to Akbar, and his daughter Man Bai to Prince Salim (Jehangir); Rajput soldiers entered Akbar's service, and Man Singh of Amber (Jaipur), the first 'Commander of Seven Thousand,' was to become the ablest of Akbar's generals.

Having mastered Marwar, Akbar decided to attack Chitor. The reigning Rana, Udai Singh, showed a craven spirit—a thing unexampled in the history of his line—but the chiefs and clans of Mewar more than atoned for his defects. The heroism of Jaimall and Patta, the dread johar, the last wild sortie, are incidents known to all. The conqueror himself was so impressed with the prowess of Jaimall and Patta that he had their effigies carved, and

mounted on stone elephants at the entrance to the fort of Agra.

The great fortress was left desolate and half ruined, and the whole of Rajputana became nominally a province of the Empire. Udai Singh laid the foundations of the new capital of Udaipur, and died not long after, having nominated his son Jagmall as his successor. But Jagmall was very soon deposed by the leading chiefs in favour of his brother Pratap Singh; and in Pratap Singh the soul of a great fighting race was once more embodied.

The odds against him seemed impossible. He had to face not only the Mogul armies but the forces of Marwar, Amber, Bikanir, and Bundi, which Akbar had persuaded or compelled to join him. Almost to the last year of his reign (1572-97) he was engaged in a bitter and apparently hopeless struggle, in which the loyalty of the Mewar clans and his own iron determination were his sole support. Driven from one mountain fastness to another, in constant anxiety for the safety of his wife and children, often deprived of the humblest necessities of food and shelter, he is a type of heroic endurance unsurpassed in history. There were dark days when even he was tempted to despair, but, 'still nursing the unconquerable hope,' he struggled on, and his gallant efforts were at last rewarded with success. He recovered many of the strongholds of Mewar, and towards the end of his reign the Moguls left him unmolested. For this he was to some extent indebted to the chivalry of Akbar, who, though he could ill brook any rival to his power or even a claim to independence, had been moved to admiration of his Rajput foe.

But the incessant strain and hardship of twenty years had been too much for mortal frame, and Pratap died in what should have been his prime, with his last thoughts trying to pierce the darkness that seemed to envelope the land which he had loved and served so well.

Prologue

The present story has been recast from material supplied by Mr. R. L. Rau, to whom the present writer wishes to express obligation.

E. L. T.

CHAPTER 1

THE HUNT

It was the first day of the merry month of Phalgun in the year 1576, and the rays of the sun as it rose over the Arvali hills touched the rugged walls of the ancient fortress of Surya Mahal and threw it into bold relief against the pale blue sky. Perched on the spur of a lofty hill, surrounded by mountain ranges, now green with the fresh grass of the spring, the fortress stood, the stronghold of Durja Singh, proud chief of the Chandrawat clan.

On the sacred plains of Mewar, the massed forces of the Moguls moved on against the gallant patriot Pratap Singh, who had sworn a mighty oath that no grass should grow, no grain ripen until Chitor was wrested from the oppressor.

But inside the fortress of Surya Mahal all was gaiety and merry-making, as men and women made ready to celebrate the festival of spring. As the sun rose higher in the sky, the great gates of the fortress swung back on their iron hinges and a hundred horsemen rode out, clad in hunting apparel and armed with pointed lances. At their head rode Durja Singh, on his left his minister of state, and on his right the Charan or Bard, whose duty it was to regale the company with story and song when they rested from the chase.

For this was the day of Aheria. The astrologer had been consulted, the omens were favourable, and the flower of Durja Singh's retinue were setting forth to hunt the wild boar, to slay it as an offering to Gauri, for on the success of the hunt depended the success of their arms in battle during the year.

Proud of bearing was Durja Singh, the Chandrawat chief. No Rajput warrior excelled him as a commander in the field. Even to far distant Delhi had reached the news of his valour and skill in the war. Still young, his face was set in lines of iron resolve, on which was a scar caused by

sword cut, received in a hand to hand combat with a Mogul foe, who paid for it with his life; for woe betide the man who crossed the path of Durja Singh, in war or peace! It was said that his vassals held him more in fear than in love, and there were tales of oppression and overbearing pride whispered against him. But little cared he as he rode at the head of his band, chosen every man for his valour in battle and skill in the chase.

As the company picked their way down the fortress steps and along the rough path that led to the jungles, story and jest were tossed from rider to rider. What cared they that the mighty Akbar's son was marching against them with countless hordes of infidels, what cared they except that the dew lay fresh on the grass, the sun shone and in the jungle below lurked their quarry? They had ridden some miles through wild country, when suddenly Durja Singh addressed his minister, pointing at the same time to a hill that stood up solitary from amongst the dense jungle. The hill was crowned by a tiny fort.

'Tell me,' said the Chief, 'is that the fort of the Bhumias?'

'Yes Rajah,' replied the minister, 'I wish it were in better hands than those of the Bhils. We could hold it to good purpose!'

'What do you mean?' said Durja Singh, 'I have never heard that the Bhumias were cowards, they know as well as every good Rajput should how to handle the sword and protect their land!'

'Your Highness, I do not dispute your words,' said the old man slyly. 'All I had meant to say was that these honest folk are readier with the tongue than the sword!'

At this jest a boisterous laugh went up from the company, and another warrior added, 'Ranaji, these Bhumias are better at tilling the land than wielding weapons! They live under the authority of great chiefs like yourself, but it would be no easy thing to take their lands from them, let alone their fortress.'

'My friend,' broke in the minister, 'it is not easy to catch a rat as long as it stays in its hole.'

Fresh laughter greeted this remark, and the company, having now reached their hunting ground, broke into groups and scattered into the deepest parts of the jungle. Earlier in the day scouts had been sent out to beat the jungles for the quarry, but they reported ill success and Durja Singh's brow grew dark as he learned that not a single boar had been sighted. In vain the men pleaded that they had searched every thicket, every cavern in vain. The impatient Chief ordered them off again and, weary though they were, they had to obey. Through the dense undergrowth, over deep nullahs and across patches of boggy land galloped the hunters. The horses, well used to the chase, carried their masters safely, though many a fall was only avoided by the skill of rider and steed.

At last, weary and disappointed with the fruitless search, Durja Singh called a halt for food and rest, and gladly the hunters swung themselves from their horses, for they were stiff with long hours in the saddle. The place where they had halted was a grassy clearing, through which ran a little stream, and, turning the horses loose to graze, the men washed off the dust from their hot faces in the cool water.

Then Durja Singh spoke. 'When we have eaten, we will again search for the boar, for I am resolved that I will not return to the fortress unsuccessful in the chase, on this the day of our Aheria!'

The men bowed their heads in silent assent. They understood their Chief well enough to know that he would keep his word at all costs and they could only hope that the afternoon would prove more fortunate than the morning, for the jungles of Mewar were not pleasant places when night fell.

Then, as was the custom of the Rajput chiefs, Duria Singh gave each man his portion and, as the food was divided

from the royal hands, the wine cup filled and emptied, warming the blood and loosening the tongues of the warriors, stories of Rajput valour and chivalry were told and sung. In silence Durja Singh listened to the company, and when their hearts beat high with pride as they recounted many a heroic deed of their clan, he addressed them thus:

'Men of the far-famed clan of Chandrawat, you know well enough how our fortunes stand. The Emperor of Delhi has already begun his march on Mewar and, shame to them, our faithless brother chiefs of Marwar, Amber and Bikanir, have made common cause with our enemies. Soon they will be fighting against their own brethren! All this you know. At such a time shall we hang back? No! I say no, by the Bhagavan Eklingi! Our cause will prevail. The victory will be ours. If by an evil chance the Maharanaji Pratap Singh should lose the day, I know that the Chandrawat warriors would rather die upon the field of battle than endure defeat at the hands of the Mogul, or surrender to our treacherous brethren who have joined them.'

As Durja Singh finished speaking a mighty shout went up from the company, and many a hand sought the sword and half drew it in that quiet glade. A grim smile passed over the face of Durja Singh, and he continued.

'Eight years have passed since the Emperor of Delhi invaded Chitor and laid waste the fair capital of Mewar. Eight years have gone by since the craven Udai Singh fled like a rat from the stronghold of his race, but Sahidas, the Chandrawat Chief did not fly. Sing, O Charan! sing of the Sesodias of Salumbar. Sing! so that the spirit of our ancestors may flow through our veins. Sing of the battlefields of old, of the Chandrawat heroes whose red blood ran in rivers over the plains of Mewar. Sing of the Rajput wives and mothers, who, seeing their lords and sons dead on the field of chivalry, cast themselves into the flames and died as they had lived for the glory of their race!'

A great sigh of pain and pride rippled through the company, and with their hands on their sword hilts, their eyes flashing, the Chandrawat warriors swore by all they held holy to fight, even to the death, for the Maharajah Pratap Singh and Mewar. Then the Charan arose, an old man well learned in the traditions of the clan, and in obedience to the command of his chief, he tuned his instrument, and in a voice which had not lost the beauty of its youth, began to sing softly.

Not a sound except the music disturbed the peace of the glade. The warriors leaned forward, deeply attentive, while Durja Singh, his proud face set in stern lines, rested his chin on his hand looking straight in front of him as if he already saw the Mogul hordes sweeping over the plains of Mewar. Visions of the fair city of Chitor rose before the eyes of the listeners. They saw the great portals of the Fort thronged with warriors clad in the saffron robes of the last sacrifice. Silently they listened to the aged minstrel, whose voice, weak and tremulous at first, rose and grew strong with the greatness of the theme he sang.

'Heroes of the Chandrawat clan ! Often have you seen the forest fires flaring to the sky and spreading in all directions carrying destruction with them. Even as those fires, the Moguls swept on to Chitor. But the Sesodias awaited them at their posts unafraid. Often, in the winter season, you have seen the dark clouds gather on the distant horizon ; even as these clouds the Moguls gathered together and flung themselves upon the gallant defenders. That day the sacred rock of Chitor ran red with the bravest blood of Mewar. Many a hero fell to rise no more. At the head of the sons of Chonda stood the brave Sahidas ; the Moguls were a hundred to one, but unflinching he stood at his post. Listen, O men ! Till the life blood fell from his veins Sahidas, wounded, weary, stood at his post. There he fell fighting ; gallant in life, gallant in death.

'See, O men, the scar on the face of your Chief. He also was there. Sahidās and Durja Singh of the Chandrawat clan! Men of stainless honour and mettle! The very gates of the Citadel were battlefields that day. Eight thousand Rajputs ate the last *bira* together. Their divinity had, alas, deserted them; for it was on Adityawar, his own day, that the sun shed his last ray of glory on Chitor. My eyes have grown dim, my fingers stray idly over these strings. Yet, brave men, as I see you here to-day, once again the old times come back to me. Never have I known the heroes of the clan turn back from the field of battle. Harken ye! to the deeds of your fathers, and of your Chief who stood at his post.'

The Charan's voice failed, and the tears rose to his eyes and fell down his withered cheeks.

The men, deeply moved, sat silent for a tense moment, and then a mighty cheer rent the quiet peace of the glade. The startled horses threw up their heads and whinnied. Again the men cheered, this time their Chief Durja Singh also, whose proud face had looked as if set in bronze during the Charan's song. Now the shadow of a smile softened its stern lines, and he said:

'Comrades, you have heard the Charan's song. Of past deeds he has sung. It is true that we have lost Chitor. The Mogul gloats over the ruined capital of Mewar. But, men, our sun is not yet set. The sword of the Maharajah Pratap Singh is still bright. He will win back for us Chitor, and in that noble cause we will not fail him. Victory to him, Prince without a peer! Victory to the patriot of Mewar, the Maharajah Pratap Singh!'

A hundred voices took up the cry of their leader, and the wild hills of Mewar echoed to the shouts of the gallant Chandrawats.

'And now for the hunt,' commanded the Chief, calling for his horse.

Quickly all was in readiness, and the whole party in the

But the chase of the morning had been long, and one after another the horses sank under their riders, bathed in sweat and foam, until Durja Singh was left alone of all that gallant company who had ridden forth so gaily from Surya Mahad.

Night was falling for the sun had already set. In the gathering gloom, the Chief could no longer see the boar, but still he pressed forward; his horse was weary and lamed by a sharp flint, but Durja Singh urged him on. It was now almost dark, but not for a moment did he think of turning back. If his horse fell under him then he would follow the boar on foot, even into the densest parts of the jungle; never, never would he return to his fortress to admit failure.

Suddenly, with a terrified scream, his horse reared, almost bearing his rider backwards to the ground. In front of them stood the boar, breathing hard, sullen with rage and at bay! Steadying his terrified horse, Durja Singh took aim and his lance went hurling through the air. But, alas! eye and arm were weary, and the lance slid past the boar, missing him by a hair's breadth, and burying itself harmlessly in the bushes beyond.

Durja Singh drew a great breath, and prepared to throw himself from his horse, but the boar was upon them, and both horse and rider crashed heavily to the ground, the powerful tusks of the enraged animal, ripping up the side of the gallant steed, before the Chief had time to slip the bridle from his arm. He closed his eyes. To fall in battle, that had always been his ambition, to fall fighting for Mewar, the land of his fathers! To die in mortal combat with the wild boar, well, that was not ignoble for a Rajput. He could feel the hot breath of the boar on his cheek, when to his amazement the great beast toppled over: almost upon him, its brain cleft with an arrow, which came whizzing through the air with so sure an aim, that the boar turned over and lay dead at the feet of Durja Singh.

Starting back, he looked round for his deliverer, and saw a slim but well-knit youth, little more than a boy, coming towards him. This then was the slayer of the boar, this stripling had saved his life, but not his honour. Durja Singh's brow grew dark and the words of gratitude died in his throat as the youth came forward. There the boar lay dead, a mighty kill, but on the day of Aheria, Durja Singh, the proud chief of the Chandrawats, hero of a hundred fights, owed his life to a stranger.

CHAPTER 2

THE EXILE

For a brief moment, Durja Singh stood in silence, battling against the feelings of anger and disappointment that filled his heart; then with a proud gesture he turned towards his deliverer, and said, 'Stranger, I do not know who you may be, but to you I owe my life to-day.'

The youth, who had waited for Durja Singh to speak first, came forward, a charming smile lighting up his face. 'It is a small thing that I have done, Prince,' he replied, 'such that any loyal Rajput would think a duty, when men such as you are sorely needed to support the cause of the noble Ranaji.'

This reply very much puzzled Durja Singh, and he looked with interest at the speaker. The boy was evidently a scion of some noble Rajput clan, but how came he here alone in the forest?

'I would know your name, brave youth,' he said, 'and to whom Durja Singh is indebted for his life.'

The youth bowed with an air of one used to noble company, and made answer, 'My name you shall know ere long, Prince. But you are weary. Not far from here lies my poor dwelling place. Be pleased to accept such simple hospitality as my forest home can provide.'

His surprise deepening, Durja Singh followed his mysterious guide down the glade. Something about the youth struck a chord in his memory. He felt that he had seen him before, but where and when he could not remember.

Chief to keep up with him. At a sharp turn in the path, he turned round, and, with an expression of embarrassment on his open countenance, said, 'Prince, I regret that I must now blindfold you for the rest of the way!'

Durja Singh's over-sensitive pride immediately rose up in arms at such a suggestion. 'What is this?' he demanded haughtily, 'and who bids the Chief of Surya Mahal be led to his abode, like a blind beggar?'

'No one but myself and my followers may learn the approach to my retreat,' replied the youth quietly.

'And if I refuse?' demanded Durja Singh.

'Then I must bid you farewell,' rejoined his guide, respectfully but firmly.

Durja Singh realized that he was at the mercy of his young companion, for it was now almost dark, and he had not the least idea of where he was. If he refused to comply with the youth's request, he would be alone and unarmed in the jungle, where wild beasts abounded, and his chance of ever getting back to the fortress would be small. With a better grace than he had yet shown, a slight smile softening his grim face, he unwound his silken turban and gave it to the young Rajput, who bound it deftly about his (Durja Singh's) eyes until it was impossible for him to see anything. Then the two men went on, the younger leading the elder by the hand.

As far as Durja Singh could tell, they were mounting all the time, and the path grew rougher and more twisted as they proceeded, but at last the wearisome journey came to an end, the bandage was removed from his aching eyes, and he found himself standing in a large cavern. It was lit by the flare of a torch which was stuck into the ground and threw weird shadows around. In these shadows lurked groups of men, and even in the fitful light of the torch, Durja Singh could see that they were sturdy and of very dark complexion. The truth flashed upon him. He was in one of the strongholds of the Bhils, the wild forest tribe

who knew every nook and cranny of the hillsides, every jackal-track of the dense jungles. But the youth? He was a Rajput, that was quite clear, but how came he here, evidently the leader of these fierce-looking men? Durja Singh remembered the jest of the morning, how his men had tossed merry banter backwards and forwards about the stronghold of the Bhumias. His old minister had made a sly jest about 'rats in holes'. This was a hole indeed; he would be lucky to escape from it with his life.

The men were talking together in some rough language which was unknown to him. He wondered if they were discussing his fate. His captor, for so he now thought of the Rajput youth, stood aloof, and as Durja Singh glanced keenly at him and met his steady candid gaze, he felt a wave of shame rise in his heart that he had for a moment doubted the lad's honour. No treachery could lie behind those clear eyes; besides, only a few hours ago, the boy had saved his life. If he had wished him ill he could have withheld the arrow which slew the boar. His weary brain could not solve the problem of the young Rajput's subsequent behaviour, or why he had brought him to his rough cavern, unless for the purpose of offering hospitality.

Suddenly he was conscious of a deadly faintness, and he swayed and would have fallen, except for a mighty effort of will which kept him erect. His host, noting the weakness, beckoned to his men, and giving them some rapid orders, withdrew with a courteous salute.

In a moment a carpet was spread on the rough floor, and serving men appeared, bearing platters of fruit, bowls of curd, piles of rough millet cakes and jars of country wine, which simple repast was placed in front of the guest.

Though nearly starving with hunger, Durja Singh stood awaiting his host's return, but as the moments went by and there was no sign of the youth, he was seized by the suspicion that he was expected to eat alone. This, the gravest breach of Rajput hospitality, deeply incensed the

Chandrawat Chief, and with an imperious air he demanded why his host did not appear.

A servant, who seemed to be in charge of the arrangements, replied respectfully that his master wished the Chief of Surya Mahal to excuse him from appearing at the meal, but that he hoped his guest would partake of the repast of which he stood so sorely in need.

Durja Singh's eyes flashed, and he said in tones of wrath, 'Go, fellow, and tell your master that he must have forgotten that no Rajput eats the salt of an absent host !'

'My master has not forgotten the rules of Rajput hospitality,' replied the servant staunchly, yet still respectfully, 'but many years ago he made a vow which prevents him from eating with one of the Chandrawat clan.'

'Many years ago,' sneered Durja Singh; 'why, fellow, your master is still little more than a boy. Does this vow, taken in his cradle, permit him to insult Durja Singh? By Eklinga, no ! I am unarmed and unattended, but I shall know how to answer an insult from one who chooses to be nameless.'

Even as he spoke, the youth stood before him, a look of pride and pain on his face, his bearing so noble that Durja Singh regretted his last words.

'Prince, it is true that my vow prevents me from breaking bread with you,' he said quietly; 'if you will not accept my food, it is as you will. I have ready a couch where you may rest after your long journey.'

The words were courteous enough but the tone was cold, and almost hostile. Durja Singh looked round. The men were watching him closely. He could see the flash of their eyes in their dark faces, the glitter of their lances, the burnished hilts of daggers. One gesture of command from their master and a hundred arrows would fly, and he was alone, his sword broken.

He stood, uncertain how to act, and the high-bred tones of the youth came to him as if from a distance.

'Prince, the night is far spent; you are weary. If it is your pleasure to rest, a simple couch awaits you.'

More generous feelings arose in the breast of Durja Singh. The boy had saved his life and offered him his best. If he had indeed sworn a vow, then it would be following a true Rajput tradition to observe it. He was a brave lad, worthy of regard, a patriot too, as his words in the forest had shown.

Durja Singh felt ashamed of his own churlishness, and with true princely grace he now approached his host and said:

'Forgive me if I have appeared ungrateful to one who has saved my life. My fatigue, this strange wild place, and your vow, which was an insult to my clan, all conspired to anger me. Let us forget everything except the service you have rendered me, a service I am anxious to repay. I do not know your name, but I can see that you come of noble blood. It is not right that you should live in this exile, cut off from your natural companions with only these wild tribesmen around you. I owe you my life. Come, ask me what you will in exchange, you will find that Durja Singh of Surya Mahal is not ungrateful.'

The youth gave a wild laugh, and then, recovering something of his calm dignity, he replied, 'What I did was for Mewar, for my country, for the Ranaji. I could not do less, and be worthy of my race.'

'Well spoken, brave boy,' said Durja Singh approvingly, though he was sorely puzzled by the mystery which surrounded the whole affair; however, he must await the confidence of this strange proud youth, who seemed to be suffering from some sense of deep wrong or injustice done to him or his in days gone by.

Indeed the Chandrawat Chief felt himself wishing that he could champion the young Rajput's cause and help him to win back his place among the noble ranks of Mewar, and he continued graciously: 'It would please me to befriend you. Come, young Sir, confide in me. It may be that I

honourable deed, worthy of a Rathor, to trap and trick an unarmed foe to goad him when he had no means with which to avenge himself. Ah! but I know you now, you and your wild band.' And Durja Singh stood in the midst of his enemies, his fatigue forgotten, the fire flashing from his eyes, his powerful frame drawn to its full height.

'Who speaks of honour?' retorted the youth bitterly, 'he who made war upon a woman, a noble Rajput wife who defended the citadel when her husband fought to the death against the foes of Mewar? Who speaks of honour? He who gained by treachery the fortress that he never won in "fair fight"? He who wriggled like a snake, who should have leapt like a tiger? and like a snake struck, death following in his trail?'

'You lie,' shouted Durja Singh, in a white heat of passion, and he hurled himself upon the Rathor, aiming furious blows at that fair scornful face.

The cave was in an uproar, a hundred lances would have pierced the body of the Chandrawat Chief, but his adversary waved his angry followers proudly back, and with the sudden skill and strength of a trained wrestler threw Durja Singh heavily to the ground. The Chief lay stunned, but after a few moments he opened his eyes and saw his victor standing over him.

'Prince!' said the young Rathor calmly, 'the night is far spent. If you choose to rest, a couch awaits you, and permit me to wish you a few hours of quiet repose.'

Dazed and ashamed, Durja Singh rose heavily to his feet. He had only one idea, to get away from this dark sinister cave, to blot out for ever the memory of the past day and night and to forget the young handsome face, the sad stern eyes now bent so searchingly upon him. 'I must go forth from this place, I must return to Surya Mahal,' he muttered, hoarsely.

'If it pleases you I will guide you upon your return journey,' replied the youth courteously.

Amazed by the magnanimity of one who owed him such a mighty grudge and in whose power he was, Durja Singh struggled to say something generous in return, but his pride had been humbled to the dust, and no words came. He merely bowed his head, and submitted as before to having his eyes bandaged. In silence the pair left the cave, in silence they took their way along the rough jungle paths. To Durja Singh the time seemed an eternity, but when they came to a halt and the bandage was removed from his eyes, he saw above him the faint glimmer of the morning star. It was not yet dawn.

He looked round and found to his surprise that he was in the same place where on the previous day he had been saved from the boar. The strange youth had disappeared. Was it all a dream? No! for at his feet lay the torn carcass of the boar, silent witness to the strange adventures of the night. Wearily Durja Singh retraced his steps towards Surya Mahal, dark thoughts his only companions. The dawn of a fresh day was breaking when he reached the foot of the fortress.

From the walls his arrival was signalled to those within and a great shout of welcome and joy rent the air. The night had been spent in anxious watching for the return of the missing Chief, and no trace of him had been found by the various search parties sent out. The thickness of the jungle and darkness of the night had made it impossible for men or their horses to penetrate beyond the point at which the intrepid Durja Singh had outstripped all his followers in the pursuit of the boar. The fear that he had perished was creeping into many a heart as the night went by and he failed to return.

At last he came, but those who watched his listless ascent of the fortress steps, and noted the disarray of his dress, feared that all was not well with him, and many who rushed to meet him fell back before the sullen anger of his face.

Without a word he passed to his private chamber, where,

having removed all traces of his ill starred adventure from his person and partaken of a sorely needed repast, he sent for his chief minister, and, peremptorily ordering everyone else from his presence, asked without any introduction: 'Tell me, do you remember the capture of this fortress?' 'And why should I have forgotten it, Prince?' replied the old man; 'it is only eight years since we entered these portals.' 'Then perhaps you can tell me what became of the Rathor Tilak Singh's son,' said Durja Singh, and the minister noticed that his master asked this strange question with averted gaze.

'Ah ! but something strange happened last night,' thought he, but he said: 'Your Highness knows that the boy slipped when trying to escape down the side of the fortress, and met his death in the ditch.'

'I wish he had,' replied Durja Singh moodily, 'but you are mistaken—the boy lives.'

'What, the boy lives?' exclaimed the minister, 'the son of Tilak Singh?'

'Ay, the son of Tilak Singh,' replied his master, 'would that he had died in the ditch with every other Rathor that day eight years ago !' and Durja Singh paced up and down the long room, clenching and unclenching his hand where it lay upon the hilt of the sword which once again rested bright and keen against his side.

'But, Prince, how do you know the boy lives?' asked the Minister earnestly, 'how could a child escape death after such a fall, or even capture if he had lived?' 'Do not ask me how and why the boy lives,' said Durja Singh impatiently; and stopping in his restless walk, he bent a dark and sombre gaze upon his faithful old councillor.

'Last night I met a youth in personal combat,' he said; 'that youth was Tej Singh.'

'But how could your Highness be sure?' urged the minister; 'even if you saw the boy, it is eight years ago, and he must have changed a great deal.'

'It was not only his face that proved him,' replied Durja Singh, 'but he showed the same invincible spirit, the genius of Mewar's fighting clan that distinguished his father. Strange words these from the lips of a Chandrawat, but who can forget the valour, the glory of Tilak Singh as he fell fighting for Mewar by the side of the Sesodia at Chitor?' The old minister, too surprised to reply, watched his master, a strange expression upon his age-worn countenance. He too remembered Tilak Singh, and he remembered also a child's fair face, seen for a moment as he gazed down from the battlement of Surya Mahal at the massacre of his kinsmen.

'Tej Singh lives,' repeated Durja Singh, and his tones were heavy with resentment; 'this Rathor stripling held my life in his hand; once, twice, he tossed it back to me as if he thought it a worthless toy. He had me at his mercy, and dared to taunt me with treachery; and I? You wonder that your Chief lives to tell such a sorry tale. But I was unarmed, in the midst of enemies. I had my hands, you think; true, and I fell upon him, there where he stood, scornful, this lad in his teens. I attacked him, though I knew it might mean instant death, but even there he foiled me, for not an arrow sped from his followers; but by his own strength he threw me and made me eat the dust of humiliation at his feet. I was stunned, he could have dispatched me easily, but he spared me so that I might limp away like a jackal, spared by a lion. Why? because he plots to despoil me of what he chooses to think his inheritance; but have a care, Tej Singh, not twice does Durja Singh get trapped.'

And with these last words, spoken more to himself than to the astounded minister, the Chief passed out on to the terrace which overlooked the very ramparts down which the intrepid Rathor boy had made good his escape eight years before.

CHAPTER 3

THE TIGER'S MOUNT

Tej Singh watched the Chandrawat Chief go with mingled feelings. That he should have saved the life of this man of all others seemed very strange, for from the time when he had, a mere boy, escaped from the fortress of Surya Mahal to the forest homes of the friendly Bhils, he had nourished a wish to revenge himself on one whom he had always believed to be the murderer of his mother. And the chance in the forest had come, and he had not taken it. The inborn chivalry of the Rajput had overcome even his own deep hatred of Durja Singh. Then again in the cave, how easy it would have been to have avenged his wrongs. The Chandrawat was in his power. The hated oppressor of the poor and weak had not a friend among the tribes who had so willingly offered their hospitality to the son of Tilak Singh, their former Chief. A word, nay a look, and Durja Singh would have been shot down by a hundred arrows from those unerring bowmen. But again, the laws of Rajput honour forbade that even an enemy should meet his death except in fair fight.

The Rathor youth felt very unhappy as he stood irresolute in the cold grey light of early dawn. He had let Durja Singh escape and was half sorry, half glad that he had done so. The man had stolen all that was his, the stately fortress, pride of place, power over a hundred vassals and a seat of honour in the councils of the Maharana. There was something else too that made Tej Singh sad, something he dared scarcely admit to himself. The memory of one to whom he had plighted his troth and who had given her word in return. How could he claim her, the noble Pushpakumari, homeless and an exile as he was?

With a deep sigh, Tej Singh turned his eyes from the spot where Durja Singh had disappeared into the jungle and went back along the mountain pathway. If

contented with his lot before, he was doubly so now. The sight of a Chandrawat had aroused the most painful feelings of jealousy in his young heart, and he felt in deep need of someone to whom he could unburden his heart. His natural dignity prevented him from making confidences to the rough kindly men of the forest. A natural barrier existed between them and the young Rathor, which neither tried to cross, good comrades though they were.

Tej Singh felt very lonely as he climbed once more the self-same track up which he had led the blindfold Durja Singh. The excitements of the night had told upon him, and he was in no mood to return to the cavern, where no doubt he would be the centre of much curiosity which he had no wish to gratify. Striking into a side path, he decided to seek out the old Charani, in her lonely cave. She was able to foretell the future; perhaps she might help him pierce the gloom that enveloped him; she might know something too of what was going on at Surya Mahal.

The sweet high call of a mountain bird set his heart beating, and with quickened pace, his eyes ardent with renewed hope, his young blood answering to every sound of nature, he plunged into the depths of the forest. Across wild hills untrodden by human foot he went, leaping the hurrying streams, and singing in a high clear voice snatches of songs he had learned from the bards; in this way he came to the abode of the prophetess, a cave so hidden by masses of overhanging rock and tangled undergrowth, that there it seemed always night.

Across the opening a rude door was fastened by a rusty chain. With the assurance of youth, Tej Singh rattled the chain and, receiving no answer, knocked loudly. Still no response came from within, and being impatient he gave the door a lusty kick, which nearly lifted it off its hinges. Immediately it was opened a very little, and a voice called out in deep hollow tones, 'Who dares come to the Tiger's Mount unbidden?'



'WHO DARES COME TO THE TIGER'S MOUNT' BY

'It is I, Tej Singh,' replied the Rathor. The door was opened wide enough to admit him, and entering he found himself in the blackest gloom. He could see nothing until suddenly a light flared up in the darkness of the cave. The figure of a woman stood in front of him. She looked as if she was a thousand years old. Her white hair streamed over her bent shoulders and the bones of her face seemed scarcely covered by the loose yellow skin. Her eyes, still clear, glowed in their sunken sockets, and as she bent her strange gaze upon Tej Singh, shielding the burning wick she held with a clawlike hand, he felt a sudden thrill of apprehension go through him and shivered as if with cold.

By the light of the flaring wick, he could see that he was in a large cave. On the floor was spread a magnificent tiger skin, complete with head and claws, and upon this there stood a rough throne or dais.

Motioning the youth to a bench of stone, the Charani seated herself upon the dais, where she remained gazing in front of her with a look of such fixed and mournful intensity, that Tej Singh had a strong wish to escape outside where the rays of the rising sun would help to dispel the gloom with which this strange place was filling him. He had almost made up his mind to go, when the voice of the Charani broke the silence.

'Who comes to disturb the Charani at such a time?' she asked, and he replied as before, 'It is I, Tej Singh!' and then he added, 'the son of Tilak Singh, the Rathor Chief of Surya Mahal, who fell defending Chitor.'

A change came over the grim face of the sibyl and her voice grew kinder as she said, 'And why does Tilak Singh's son come to the Tiger's Mount?'

'Lady,' said Tej Singh earnestly, 'it is well known that you can see into the future of those who come to seek your wisdom, and mine is so dark, so misty, that I do not know which way to turn. I am friendless, an exile from my kinsmen and home; the kingdom and the castle that should

have been my inheritance are in the hands of the enemy. Where once the proud emblem of the Rathors waved over the fortress of Surya Mahal, the flag of the Chandrawats proclaims to all the world that I am dead or craven.'

'Noble youth,' said the Charani, 'what you tell me is not strange, for I have long known of the feud which exists between the Rathor and the Chandrawat. But Durja Singh is strong; what he has he will hold, and it is no shame to you that you have failed to regain the fortress.'

'No shame to me?' cried Tej Singh, starting up from his seat, 'and shall a Rathor skulk forever in the forest like some maimed animal, while Durja Singh struts like a peacock upon the battlements from which I saw my mother killed? Shall he take what is mine while I let my sword rust, my bow warp and my heart wither? Rather than this should happen I will seek him out, though he be surrounded by a thousand of his vaunted Chandrawats, seek him out, and in single combat slay him or be slain, for so does a Rathor live or die.'

'Gently! my child,' said the Charani. 'You need not tell me of your powers, or what kind of blood flows in Rathor veins. But it would seem to me that Durja Singh had a right to the fortress of Surya Mahal, which was the stronghold of the Chandrawats long before the Rathors took it from them. He has now only won back what once belonged to his clan.'

'What you say sounds just and right,' said Tej Singh, 'but the Rathors took Surya Mahal by right of conquest. Durja Singh regained it by the blackest treachery that for ever wiped out the gallant deeds of a man's life in one base action. When have the Rathors failed in honour? Their chronicle is written in words of blood. Through countless generations they have held their standard aloft unstained by one act of treason towards their land. And my father, he was a true Rathor; when the call came to defend Chitor against the Mogul, he was among

to rally round the standard of Mewar, and he fell, as his ancestors had fallen, fighting for the freedom and glory of Rajasthan !'

Tej Singh had worked himself up into a passion of excitement during this speech, and the voice of the Charani sounded almost gentle in comparison with the clarion tones of the young Rathor, as she said, 'I know well that what you say is true; brave deeds the Rathor history has never lacked, nor brave men, but this feud between your clan and the Chandrawats, tell me the reason of it.'

Tej Singh gave a harsh laugh. 'The Rathors and the Chandrawats have never loved each other; for generations they have been rivals, and many have been the battles between the two clans. When the Rathors first came from Marwar, my ancestors conquered the fortress of Surya Mahal, and by superior force of arms held it until it once more fell into the hands of the Chandrawats, but not by the valour of their swords, not by the sacrifice of their lives for a brave cause. For four generations, the Rathors were Chiefs of Surya Mahal, and by all that I deem holy I will win it back, and crush Durja Singh to the earth or die in the attempt.'

'Peace !' said the Charani, 'it is the cool head that wins the day,' and she smiled faintly as she spoke. She knew Tej Singh well, and something of his history; she guessed that he had sought her out to ask her to foretell his future, hoping that she would prophesy the downfall of Durja Singh and the restoration of Surya Mahal to a scion of the Rathor race.

'You have come to me so that I may tell you what the future holds in store for you, brave youth,' she said slowly, 'and would that I could promise you all that your heart most desires. The present is the only thing we know. If it had been well for us to probe the future, the Gods would have given us the power to do so.'

'But they say that you have this gift,' broke in Tej Singh.

'They say,' repeated the Charani, 'but they do not know.'

If I am wiser than those that come to me, it is because I have learned from the past what may be expected in the future; but why should you try to rend the veil, Tej Singh? It is the present that most concerns you.'

'The present,' muttered the youth, 'but I am so unhappy in the present. An exile, forced to roam about the forest like some lonely animal bereft of its kind, without a soul to care whether I live or die.'

'It is hard indeed,' agreed the Charani, 'and I pity you from the bottom of my heart, not that you are an exile from the seats of the mighty, but because you are young and life and love are denied you.'

Tej Singh looked up quickly, a bright flush staining his clear cheek. 'Then can you read my thoughts?' he asked, and his eyes fell before the steady gaze of the Charani.

'Not all,' she replied quietly. 'Once I knew your father, the noble Tilak Singh, and his son must have other hopes than revenge or the downfall of his enemy. He must live to add to the glory of his country, and to die for it if needs be.'

Tej Singh was silent; the words of the Charani rebuked and calmed the bitter feelings which threatened to overwhelm him. When he spoke again, his voice had regained something of its musical charm, and the lines, which the night of strain and conflict had drawn round his candid eyes, seemed to fade away. But the need to speak of all that was in his heart was great. He had been silent so long.

'Let me tell you something of my story,' he said almost pleadingly; 'you would not bid me to relinquish my feud against Durja Singh if you knew all that I had suffered and lost through him. When you have heard me through, you shall judge whether or no I have just cause to wish for revenge.'

'Well, let me hear your story, and when it is ended perhaps I shall know what counsel to give you,' she replied, and placing the wick in a stone vessel of oil, she bent for-

ward, her long white hair hanging like a mantle round her, both face and form as motionless as if carved out of stone.

CHAPTER I

TEJ SINGH TELLS HIS STORY

'Lady,' began Tej Singh, 'my life has not always been spent in the forest, nor was revenge the only thought that filled my mind. I was born the son of a Rajput Prince, whose family was well known through all the length and breadth of Rajasthan, for who has not heard of the Rathor Tilak Singh and the impregnable fortress of Surya Mahal?

'During my father's lifetime, the Chandrawats, led by Durja Singh, made many an attempt to win back the stronghold, but every time they were repulsed with heavy loss, and driven back sullen and disappointed. Then the great call to all loyal Rajputs came. Chitor was menaced by Akbar, and the Chiefs who still held their honour above worldly gain forgot their private feuds and hastened to the defence of Mewar. My father and Jaimal of Badnor, another gallant chieftain of the Rathor clan, were among the first to answer the call, and with every available man placed themselves at the disposal of the Maharana. But alas! the Turks came in thousands, where the Rajputs had but hundreds, and though each defender of Chitor fought like ten men, accounting for a dozen enemy lives before he yielded his own, the struggle was in vain.

'My father fell by the side of the heroic Sahidas, whose altar stands on the brow of the rock that was moistened by his blood; the brave Jaimal, struck by a bullet, died commanding that, rather than the defenders should surrender, they must hurl themselves upon the foe and die to a man. Eight thousand Rajputs put on the yellow robes, the gates were thrown open, and few survived to tell the grim tale of what they saw that day.

forted each other, and when we were calmer she promised to live for my sake, to hold the fortress, woman and widow as she was, until the day came when I should be old enough to defend my inheritance against all comers.

‘For a time we were very happy together there, in the home we knew and loved. Our garrison was very small, for most of our retinue had fallen with their Chief at Chitor, but such men as remained to us were loyal to the core. I spent my days in practising those military arts which are the chief part of a Rajput youth’s training. I was soon expert in the use of the sword and dagger, and could wield a mace heavy for a grown man, but my favourite exercise was with the bow. For hours every day I practised with this weapon, until it became a pastime of my companions to pit me against some Bhil champion, and lay wagers on the result. I was then about twelve years old and life seemed very good.’

Tej Singh paused for a moment in his narrative, as if he were thinking of the days gone by; then he resumed in a lower tone.

‘With my father at Chitor had perished one of his dearest friends, a Rathor Chief whom he had known and loved since boyhood. Together they had hunted the wild boar, together they had ridden through the wild passes of the Aravali, seeking those experiences of danger and chivalry so dear to the heart of the Rajput, and as they grew to manhood, married and had children, they planned to crown their friendship by an alliance between the two families.

‘I was my father’s eldest son; the Rathor had an only daughter, a beautiful little girl, who, when she first came to Surya Mahal, was about eight years old. I had no sister of my own, and this child seemed to me so delicate and wonderful compared to my own rough and sturdy self that I was almost too shy to talk to her, though she prattled merrily enough. But in time we became fast friends and I would often tell her all the great and wonderful things

I intended doing when I became a man, and she would sit beside me, on the edge of the great battlements, from where we could see the distant line of the Aravali mountains. And as I talked, she would weave a garland or a bracelet of blossoms from the blossoms she had gathered in the gardens of the Palace.

‘One day when I was boasting of all the great and glorious things I meant to do, she slipped a little circlet of flowers upon my wrist, and tossing the long dark hair from her eyes, she said, half laughing, half serious: “Now you are my Rakhi-band Bhai, my bracelet-bound brother. If ever I am in danger or distress you will have to come and rescue me. That is what happens when Rajput Princesses honour some gallant Chief with the gift of the Rakhi.”

‘I was quite abashed by the simple gift and its meaning, and sat turning it round and round upon my wrist. “Take care! you will break it,” she cried, “and I cannot make you another, for see, the sun sets behind the hills, and I must go;” and with a merry laugh at my bewildered face, she jumped up, scattering her flowers over the stones of the terrace, and sped away.

‘I have the bracelet still, and its scent and meaning are as potent to-day as they were that day more than eight years ago, when the child Pushpakumari left me on the battlements at Surya Mahal.

‘A little later we were formally betrothed amid family rejoicings and every omen of happiness. But even then the storm cloud hung heavy over Mewar. Akbar, the Mogul Emperor, marched upon Mewar, and in a few short weeks Pushpakumari and I were both fatherless.

‘By a miracle Durja Singh had escaped with his life from the massacre that followed the fall of Chitor, and learning that a woman ruled at Surya Mahal, formed the dastardly plan to seize the fortress, which had long been the ~~summit~~ of his ambitions. But, knowing the laws of Rajput ~~and~~ would be outraged by an attack upon a fortress

woman, he set about his purpose by means so secret that no warning of approaching danger ever reached my mother until the Chandrawat chief was in possession of the main entrance to the stronghold. It was too late to shut the gates, the foe was inside, but my brave mother never wavered. Seizing a dagger she cried, "In the name of the Rathors, who will follow me?" and a hundred men sprang to her side.

'Below the gates, Durja Singh himself led a body of his retainers, and upon him, the cause of her misfortunes, my gallant mother advanced. He looked up, and seeing a woman, drew back in amazement. Fearlessly she pressed forward, and drawing her dagger plunged it into his breast. With a cry of "Seize her!" he swooned and fell. And they cut her down, there where she stood, she and her brave defenders. From the battlements where I was hemmed in by the foe, I saw her die and I would have thrown myself over the edge and perished on the rocks beside her, but at that moment the iron of revenge burnt into my soul; and I planned to escape, so that I might wait for my enemy, the murderer of my mother, kill him with my bare hands, and thus wipe out in blood the deadly feud that lay between us, the Rathor and the Chandrawat.'

Tej Singh, who had been speaking rapidly, and with intense feeling, paused, almost overcome by the emotion which his memories had aroused in him. The Charani, who had not moved during the whole of his narrative, now leaned forward to trim the wick which burned dim; then motioning to him to proceed, resumed her former attitude of silent calm.

'And so,' said Tej Singh, 'I looked round for a chance to escape. I slipped, unseen by any of the enemy, into a little chamber which overlooked a thickly wooded ravine. The window was small, but I squeezed myself through and clung like a tiger cat to the rough face of the battlements. Then, with a silent prayer to heaven for protection, I began my perilous descent down the face of the fortress, swinging

myself over the ledges by clinging to the twisted branches of the trees that somehow or other found room to grow in the fissures which split up the solid rock.

Twice I slipped, and hung by one arm to a branch which creaked and bent with my weight, but at last I saw the water of the moat dark and sinister just below me. My heart missed a beat—I could swim, but what reeds, what slimy mud might not entangle and suck me down into those noisome depths! The moat was wide, far beyond my power to jump. I hung there suspended by the last friendly branch, not daring to let myself drop. But my arm soon ached with such intensity, that at last I had to let go, and fell into the water, where I at once struck out, hoping to keep clear of reeds and mud by my vigorous efforts.

I reached the other side, and managed to scramble out up the steep banks. At last I felt almost safe, but so weak and exhausted from all that I had endured, that I sat down and, with my head buried in my hands, burst into tears. I was all alone in the world, a fugitive without a home or friend. Behind me lay the great fortress, now in the hands of the hated Durja Singh, in front of me lay rocky jungles that promised poor hospitality to a weary sorrow-stricken boy. But in those deep dark forests, amid the rocks and ravines where the leopard has his lair and the eagle her nest, I found a refuge among the honest friendly Bhils, with whom I have remained ever since.

It is to these simple faithful children of the forest that I owe my life to-day, for they found me nearly dead from hunger and fatigue, and carrying me to their retreat, deep hidden from the world, they nursed me back to health, and if not to happiness, it was because that was beyond their powers.

For eight years I have lived the life of their tribe, and now they regard me almost as their leader, for my father was their true Chief. Never will they bow the knee to the Chandrawat! Never will their devotion to t

waver ! Last night I had full proof of their devotion to me. But, Lady, you are weary of my tale.'

For a time no sound broke the silence of the cave. The Charani still sat as if she were completely oblivious to all worldly happenings. Tej Singh began to wonder if she had completely forgotten his existence, when she turned towards him and asked: 'And of the child Pushpakumari, she to whom you plighted your troth, what was her fate when the fortress fell to Durja Singh?'

'Alas ! she remained a prisoner,' sighed Tej Singh, 'but they tell me she is treated with distinction. Perhaps she thinks as others do that I am dead. Sometimes I wish that I were.'

'We live in times when a man's life is not his own to dispose of, for it is pledged to the Maharana,' said the Charani solemnly. 'The feud between you and the Chandrawat is indeed a bitter one, Tej Singh, but not so bitter as that between the Rajput and the Mogul. When Mewar stands redeemed, then you may settle this quarrel as you will. A greater enemy than Durja Singh menaces you and every loyal son of Rajasthan. The clans must put aside their petty wrongs to avenge a great one, the despoilation of Chitor. While you drive off the hawk, the eagle will swoop down and bear off all that is left you. All Mewar must be up in arms; if needs be you must even fight shoulder to shoulder with Durja Singh.'

'Never !' exclaimed Tej Singh indignantly, 'you ask too much when you say that I shall act the comrade towards the murderer of my mother !'

'Time rights many wrongs,' continued the Charani, 'but time never restores a man his lost honour. Think you that Durja Singh will ever wipe out the stigma of his treachery; think you that though he be the bravest of the brave; though he offer his life to atone, that he will ever be able to meet you without a pang of shame? Mewar has need of you, son of Tilak Singh; be a man, forget your

private feud. Go! and fight for your country, and your Prince.'

'But lady!' replied Tej Singh, 'you speak as if even now Akbar was advancing. What need is there for me to offer myself to the Maharana, when there has as yet been no general call to arms? Man Singh has returned to Delhi, carrying his army with him. Unless there are fresh plots afoot to despoil the Rajputs again, I cannot see why I should not settle my private quarrel.'

The Charani smiled, as if at the prattle of a child. 'Think you, Tej Singh,' she said, 'that the Mogul Emperor has forgotten Pratap Singh. To the powerful Akbar, who thirsts to subdue the whole length and breadth of Hindustan, such a one as our Prince is a constant thorn in the side. Chitor is vanquished, but Kumbhalmer, Gogunda and other powerful fortresses are still in the hands of the Rajputs. Mewar is a parched desert, useless to the Turk. Behind it all, Akbar feels the iron hand of the unconquerable Sesodia and longs to destroy him. Man Singh has returned to Delhi, it is true, but to raise fresh troops, bring more forces against Pratap Singh. You came to me to help you read your future, and I tell you that I see you fighting, not only to regain your fortress of Surya Mahal, but for the liberty of the whole Rajput race. I see you with no thought of self, but with your whole heart and soul and the strength of your vigorous youth pitted against the enemy in the noble cause of the Maharana.'

The Charani ceased speaking, and Tej Singh rose to his feet.

'Lady, I thank you,' he said simply yet proudly, and with a low bow to the Charani, he left her abode.

CHAPTER 5

THE TEARS OF AN OLD MAN

The day following Durja Singh's meeting with Tej Singh in the forest of Mewar was the occasion for a great assembly

backwards and crush the Chief. But the victory was with Durja Singh, and after a few more minutes had passed, he cantered proudly on to the parade ground to be received by wild shouts of greeting and admiration from the assembled warriors for his fine horsemanship.

The order was issued for 'slow march', and the whole cavalcade moved majestically out of the fortress gates, banners floating gaily in the morning breeze, the rocks on either side of the route echoing to the steady tramp of the horses' feet. Soon the hills were left behind and the landscape changed, the frowning scarps giving way to the flat plains of Chandrapur.

The little town, scarcely more than a village, contained only a few thousand inhabitants, who were by right of conquest the men of Durja Singh. Formerly Chandrapur had acknowledged the Rathor Chief as overlord, but now a Chandrawat Chieftain held Surya Mahal and ruled over the surrounding villages; the just and kindly rule of the noble Tilak Singh had given way to the harsher methods employed by Durja Singh to impress his vassals with a true sense of his importance and their dependence.

On many a hapless head the wrath of Durja Singh had fallen often undeservedly. Though a fine soldier and a brave man, the new Chief of Surya Mahal harassed his vassals unbearably, and they, Rajputs and men of spirit, naturally revolted. A time came when his commands were neglected, his orders disobeyed. Protests and petitions against the intolerable treatment of loyal Rajputs reached him. The old Chiefs, who felt themselves too weak to defy him, suffered his insolence and hoped for better days, but the younger men sturdily represented their claims for juster treatment.

Among these was a gallant warrior called Keseodas, son of the aged Gokuldas, wisest man in Chandrapur. Seeking to impress his power by some drastic means upon his unruly vassals, Durja Singh seized the brave Keseodas, and in the sight of his agonised father, had him put to death as a rebel.

And now Gokuldas stepped up to where Durja Singh was reining back his mettlesome mount, and with his hand stretched out, almost as if he would lay it upon the bridle, the old man said proudly, 'There has been no traitor in our family, O Chief.'

'Ha! ha!' jeered Durja Singh, 'and since when have the foxes and jackals boasted of their ancestry? Show us your inheritance, old fool, your castle and your citadel, your wide lands and noble retinue.'

'Caste and citadel I have none,' replied Gokuldas, 'but I still possess that which the true Rajput values above either, my honour. No act of treachery, no foul deed soils the name I bear. Though we serve a strange and cruel master, though we are treated as slaves, still we remain true and loyal to the cause of Mewar. I do not fear you or your taunts, proud Chief. Remember that I too am born a Rajput, even as you are and that I will brook no insult.'

The whole company of Durja Singh heard the words of the old vassal, and many were filled with dismay at the thought of what effect the defiance of Gokuldas would have on their fiery Chief. They felt sure that a swift and terrible retribution would fall upon that white head, but even they were unprepared for the sudden violent action of Durja Singh.

Trembling with passion he cried, 'Fool that you are, well shall you remember the anger of your lord. In vain have you seen the agonies of your dying son. I will teach you how a serf should bow to his master,' and, digging his spurs into the sides of his already plunging horse, he rode straight at the old Rajput and as horse and rider thundered past, strong men closed their eyes.

In the white dust of the road, Gokuldas lay on his face where he had fallen; a thin trickle of blood oozing from a deep cut in his head, but so that he should live to remember a still greater cause for vengeance, fortune had spared

his life. He was only stunned, and presently he sat up and gazed after the cavalcade which, with the infuriated Durja Singh at its head, had galloped through the deserted village, and was now scarcely more than a cloud of dust on the horizon.

With difficulty he struggled to his feet, and folding his shaking hands in an attitude of prayer to heaven, he said, 'Grant me this, O Lord, to wipe out my disgrace before I die and to avenge the murder of my son.'

CHAPTER 6

THE MEETING AT SALUMBAR

Above the fair fortress of Salumbar floated the standard of the Chandrawat chief, Krishna Singh, and on the level plain below, men and horses were massed, for the Rawut had summoned his clansmen to Salumbar, and from far and wide they had come with their retinues, and now awaited his commands.

It was the Holi festival, and from the citadel came the sound of laughter and song. Maidens, dressed in their brightest saris, pelted each other with flowers, a merry greeting upon the coming of spring. The clank of spear and shield mingled with the songs of the merry makers, as the chiefs ascended the fortress steps, and here and there a buffoon tumbled about, jostling the follower of some haughty noble, and casting his light jests amid the talk of sterner matters. Spring was in the air, but it was not to celebrate the festival that Krishna Singh had assembled his vassals. By his invitation they were now gathered together in the audience chamber, awaiting his coming.

As he entered, his Charans singing sweetly before him, a great cry of welcome burst from every throat, for no prince in Mewar was more beloved than he, no leader whose counsel was more valued, no adherent more faithful to the cause of the Maharana Pratap Singh, than he. An old man,

but his sword arm was as strong and his eye as bright as that of many a younger warrior, and those who greeted him now with devoted pride knew that he had called them there for some great purpose.

Graciously he received the salutation of his clansmen, and graciously he bade them all be seated. For a moment he glanced keenly round the assembly, and missing not a chief or vassal who should be there, he took his place among them, well pleased. And again the warriors made the roof ring with the vigour of their greeting, as with a smile, half proud, half glad, the old Chief rose to address them:

'Listen, brave chieftains of mine. Right loyally have you greeted me to-day; right gladly do I welcome you. You know well why I have summoned you, counting surely upon your loyalty and support. Not to partake of the jests and joys of Holi are you here to-day; but to proffer once more your swords and perchance your lives for the defence of Mewar.

'Chitor, the sacred stronghold of the Sesodias, is in the hands of the enemy. They have tried to wrench from us our independence, which the Rajput wears as proudly as the peacock plume in his turban.

'They have bribed men of our race to their cause (more shame to them who serve the alien), they cast greedy eyes upon the few strongholds that are left us, and make ready once more, to batter and defile those sacred shrines protected for generations by the valour of our forefathers. They have sworn too that the Rajput shall walk as a stranger in his own land, and for this alone your swords should leap from your scabbards, your blood run fast and hot, with the passion for revenge. From the north at Kumbhalmer, to Rukimath in the south, but a strip of land remains to us. All else is lost; but mark you, my brave men, Mewar will prove but a sorry prize for the Mogul. All that once was so fair and smiling is now a parched desert. No farmer tills the soil, or brings his sheaves home. No shepherd

roams over the meadows, piping sweetly as he guards his flocks and herds, for so has the Maharana willed it and his word is law.

'We have seen the result of disobedience in the fate of the peasant, who heedless of the royal command, planted his garden in a land where Maharana Pratap Singh had said no corn should ripen, no grass grow to feed the Mogul or his horses. No longer is the man seen at work upon his little patch of bajri and jowari, but a body swings upon the mango-tree, where once he sat under its shade to take his midday meal, and the birds of the air, the shrill squirrel, and the mournful howl of the lone jackal, alone break the stillness which broods over Chitor. No lamp is lit within those stately halls, no fair hand gather garlands from the jessamine and mogra flowers, which bud, blossom and wither, even as our hopes have withered.

'The Maharana's wish is law, he is wise, for when the Mogul claims the land, not a grain of corn shall it yield, not a leaf or flower break the desolation of the scene. Nor shall they find peace in the blackened land, for every valley, every pass, every nook and crannie of the Aravali shall conceal a foe, and when we have harassed them by night and by day, taken steady toll of their men, by well planned sorties from our hiding places, then we will give them battle, mighty battle; even as the gallant Sanga, or the fearless Prithvi Raj, faced and defied the foe: so, under the banner of Maharana Pratap Singh, will the fighting clans of Mewar face and defy the forces of Akbar.

'The bravest names of Rajasthan shall swell the list; even the peaceful Bhumias shall forsake the plough for the sword, and wield it doughtily for the cause. From their caves and holes in the hill side, the trusty Bhils, hardy sons of the forest and skilful bowmen, shall swell the ranks of the Maharana. The Mirs from the west, the Minas from the east, these too are faithful and will muster round the royal standard.

'Man Singh, the traitor, marches with the Emperor's son against us. Soon shall Man Singh be reminded of that which he threw away, the glory of fighting for the motherland.

'To-day is the festival of Holi, the ground is red with flowers. Soon it shall be red with blood, for we shall keep another festival, that of death for a noble cause. Hark ! in the city they are singing, but you shall hear music far sweeter than this with which they greet the spring. You shall hear the music of the marching drum, the clash of swords and the hymns of the bards as they sing of your valour through the ages.

'Men of the Chandrawats, sons of Rajasthan, all the world shall know how we keep our festivals. Victory or death our song, and on high the gods wait to receive the souls of those who perish in the fight ! Great is the reward of those who fall in defence of their country.'

The strong clear voice of the Rawut broke and failed him in his last words. Was he thinking of the grand and terrible sacrifice of Chitor, when the flower of Mewar's fighting clans perished in the dread Johar ? Was he thinking of that noble procession of women, who, bearing garlands and singing, walked serenely to the funeral pyre ?

He sat down, exhausted by his impassioned appeal, but it had not been in vain, for with cheers and loud cries of 'Death to the Mogul', the whole company sprang to their feet. With flashing swords bared, then and there each Chief and vassal pledged themselves to the cause of the Maharana, and the marble walls and lofty pillars of the great hall echoed again and again with shouts of 'Victory ! Victory !'

Then entered the chief bard of Salumbar, and upon the noisy company fell peace. The tumult ceased, swords rested in their scabbards, and the warriors sat down to listen to the songs they loved. With a profound obeisance to his lord, the old minstrel softly tuned his ektari, and

casting his eyes round the assembled company, stood as if uncertain how to commence his lay. Then, as if some secret thought had brought him inspiration, he began.

'Who shall sing of the beauties of Salumbar or tell of the glorious deeds of her departed heroes? I see you, noble warriors, young and full of hope for the future. The future is for the young, the past for the old. By my beard you may see that I am old, and the past is ever with me, sometimes light as the sunshine that gilds the peaks of the Aravalis, sometimes dark as the rain clouds that burst upon the mountain tops in winter; and in those clouds, I see some brave forms. Hark to that which I shall say of them. Our Maharana is no longer in Chitor. He dwells in a cave. His lady, our Queen, lives with him there, and the royal children play under the shade of the sal trees. In the days of my youth, I knew another such as he, one that lived in these very forests. Like a melody, heard long since, the memory of those days comes back to me. Listen, O warriors, to the story of another princely fugitive.

'One day a boy, son of the Prince of Mewar, took his way to the temple of the oracle, where it stood upon the mountain side. Entering the portal without ceremony, he took up his place, with one knee upon the lion's skin which was spread in front of the priestess.

'Behind him came his brother, and approaching the wise woman, besought her to say which of the two should mount the throne. Speaking no word, she pointed to him who knelt upon the lion's skin. The omen was decisive, but bitter was the rage and envy of the brother; he drew his sword, he advanced upon his kinsman, and before the boy could defend himself, he had lost an eye. Fleeing from the temple, he managed to escape into the forest.

'And now you must seek him among the goatherds who mind their flocks upon the mountain side. There, in his weather-stained and ragged dress, he minds the goats. At nightfall he drives them back, and is beaten and driven forth

'By the grace of Eklinga Mewar shall be restored;
From his exile shall our Maharana return;
From the hills of the north to the seas of the south
His name shall resound;
Victory, Victory, to the Maharana Pratap Singh!'

CHAPTER 7

THE MAHARANA PRATAP SINGH

A few days after the meeting at Salambur, Krishna Singh, the gallant veteran, rode at the head of his contingent into Kulbhalmer, and there reported himself to the Maharana.

Every day saw the arrival of some loyal chief. First and foremost among them was the head of the Sangawat clan from Deogarh, who brought down two thousand picked warriors, men of ripe fighting experience and eager for a fresh chance to display their prowess.

The chieftains of the Mertia clan, sturdy offshoots of the Rathors, joined forces. Among them were the sons of Jaimal of Badnor; they would not soon forget the death of their father, who fell by Akbar's bullet, in defence of Chitor.

And there rallied to the crimson standard of the Seodias the Jagawat chief of Kelwa. He, too, had memories of Chitor, for the stripling hero Patta was his cousin, and what Rajput could forget the story of the noble mother, who, bidding her son put on the saffron robe of sacrifice, lest he should sully the fair fame of Kelwa, by fears for the safety of his newly wed bride, armed the maiden with a lance. 'Come!' she said, and no tremor shook her voice, 'let us show our warriors that Rajput women embrace death rather than risk dishonour.'

And the two women descended the fortress steps and fell fighting.

What an example for the youthful defender of Chitor! Regardless of life he displayed great valour, and died as the famous members of his clan had died, defending his post to the last.

And other famous names swelled the lists of chiefs who had responded to the call of loyalty. Dilwara, Beda, and Khorai all were there with their retinues of stalwart warriors. The Parmars of Bizli, kinsman of the Maharana, was one of the first to remind him that he still had staunch friends to support him. From far and wide men and horses streamed into Kumbhalmer, some vassals offering perhaps but a hundred men, but with the same willing fidelity to the cause as that displayed by the haughty princes who represented the first sixteen royal families of Mewar.

There were now more than twenty thousand men encamped below the fortress, unequalled for their valour and patriotism in the whole of Hindustan.

It was the last day of the spring festival, and the camp fires burned merrily in the cool evening air.

Far away from the noise and tumult of the soldiers, a man stood alone upon the top of one of the hills which overhung the scene. His eyes were turned towards Chitor, where the ruined fortress lay, its mighty mass looming darkly under the faint glow of the stars. No light shone out from those shattered palaces, no banner floated over the deserted battlements, and as he thought of what his race had held and what they had lost when the greatest of their strongholds fell to Akbar, a great bitterness and grief filled the heart of the silent watcher.

From below came the faint refrain of the soldiers' songs. They could be happy because it was spring and the promise of war held out to them that chance of proving their mettle, that the Rajput warrior gloried to find. To rejoice and to meet death in a hand to hand encounter with the foe—what more could a fighting Rajput ask? But for him, the chosen head of the Sesodias, the descendant of Bappa, there were other ends. The salvation of Mewar was entrusted to him, and he alone had the strength to attempt the task. He had sworn a mighty oath that unfettered Mewar was freed from the Mogul invader, the gol



PRATAP SINGH VOWS TO RESTORE CHITOR

dishes should be replaced by platters of leaves, and that he would eat no food save that which the forest afforded.

A wonderful man, Pratap Singh, Maharana of Mewar, one possessed of such unfailing purpose, such lofty ideals that even with the combined forces of the Emperor Akbar against him, he stood there upon the silent hill top, his great sword hanging by his side, and vowed silently that with his last drop of blood he would strive to redeem the cradle of the Sesodia race.

What sacred relics the ruined fortress guarded! What a long roll of illustrious dead lay beneath its defaced monuments. Their spirits called to him to protect their last resting place.

And should the foot of the Mogul defile those holy stones, while a Prince of Mewar lived to wield the sword?

He had but one desire, one strong unceasing purpose to fulfil, and though the whole of Akbar's forces marched against him, though the princes of Amber, Bikanir, Marwar, and Bundi had allied themselves with the enemy, he would defy them all, win back his kingdom, and restore Chitor to all her ancient glories.

Behind him lay the story of battles lost and battles won. Sometimes he had gained a few miles of territory, sometimes lost that so dearly won at the sacrifice of gallant men, ill spared and hard to replace. Often since the fall of Chitor he had been a hunted wanderer in the wild uplands and wooden slopes of the Aravalis hard pressed by the enemy, often unable to meet the expenses of his errant army, yet never relinquishing his determination to make a final effort to free his country from the yoke of the invader.

At Fatipore Sikri, the Emperor longed for the time when the Maharana of Mewar should bow before the Imperial throne, as the Princes of Amber and Marwar had already done. This obstinate Sesodia, gaunt, hunted, short of men and money, should yet acknowledge him, Akbar, descendant of Timur, as his overlord. He should come as a sup-

pliant, where his brother Chiefs had been received with rich rewards, and a place in the Imperial councils.

But the Mogul Emperor counted without the glorious tradition that upheld the Sesodia Prince in his lofty resolve to free his motherland from the usurper and despoiler. Gold could not buy him, his honour was above price.

Alone he stood there, in the soft spring night, without a kingdom, without a place to lay his head, he the descendant of a thousand princes; and as he turned his sombre gaze once more towards Chitor, the sight of the great fortress deserted, dishonoured, kindled anew the fire in his heart.

'All shall be restored to you, my beautiful,' he said passionately, and the hot tears stung his eyelids as he thought of all that she had lost and suffered.

Below him the camp was sleeping, the soldiers' songs were hushed, the fires burnt low. The force that his Chieftains had raised between them represented the last of his fighting resources. Every man from prince to peasant had come in. God grant that their loyalty should not be in vain.

He moved slowly away wrapped in thought, until he remembered that it must be close on midnight, the hour when he had summoned the heads of the clans to a council of war. They were waiting for him in a grassy clearing that now served him as an audience chamber, and as his tall figure strode majestically into the moon-lit space, the cry of 'Long life to our Prince!' rang out.

Bowing to all with true regal dignity, the Maharana passed to the mound of dried grass that now served him for a gadi, and seating himself, motioned the Chief of Salumbar to his right hand as the place of honour.

The rest of the company placed themselves according to their rank, and even in this simple spot no detail of ceremony was neglected. Though the hour was midnight, the Chiefs were attired in full apparel, and each carried arms

brothers, we meet here to-night for a council of war. The Mogul army gathers like some huge dark rain-cloud upon the horizon. My scouts tell me that even before the monsoon breaks we may have the forces of Akbar upon us. They hope to surprise us, take us off our guard, but we will be ready for them. They come to a barren land; the parched and blackened fields promise food for neither man nor beast.

‘Their entry into Mewar shall be grim, and many, very many shall never return to Fatipore Sikri. Slowly, confidently they march towards the Aravalis, where, in every pass and defile, we shall be waiting for them; for shall we, while we have our lives and our swords, quail before the Turk?

‘Shall the descendants of Bappa Rawul, sacred name, the guardians for centuries of Rajput honour, slink to an alien court and rot as petty vassals of the Mogul? He has bought with his gold the Princes of Marwar; even my brother Sakta has become a stranger to me and to his race; better if the clan of the Sesodias had disappeared from the face of the earth than that one of its princes should suffer such ignominy.

‘Listen, my friends, the score is growing long. Chitor lies there a silent reminder of our duty, a mournful monument of all that we have lost. Despoiled and sullied, she still calls to us to avenge her wrongs, and as long as life remains within me, so long as the strength of my arms sustain me, I will wage eternal war against the Turk and stem the Mogul flood.

‘My chiefs, though we are denied our strongholds and our cities, we can live in these forests; though we may fail to win back the greatness that was ours, we can still keep unsullied the honour of our ancestors.

‘It is the last day of the spring festival. To-morrow’s sun shall see us make ready for battle. To arms, men, like the Rajputs of old! Let the Emperor Akbar and his ally Man Singh know that the glory of Mewar has not yet departed; and a brave heart and a straight way to you all!’

It was now that the loyalty of the Bhils became so valuable, for these sturdy bowmen were well used to mountain warfare, and could take aim from a tree, a narrow ledge of rock, or any other unlikely vantage point, as easily as a trained archer at a target.

Among the Chieftains who led in these sons of the forest was one who attracted Pratap Singh's immediate attention. Well acquainted though he was with his adherents, this young Chief of the Bhils seemed a stranger to him; also he could see at once that the youth was a Rajput, and how came a Rajput at the head of a band of forest bowmen? The Bhils were small men of dark complexion, but this young man was tall and graceful, with a fair skin and an air of haughty distinction that marked him out as one born to some high estate.

Pratap Singh noticed too, that while the Bhils wore the scanty garments of their tribe, their leader was attired in the dress of a Rajput Chief; a heron's plume waved in his turban, and as well as the bow, sole weapon of the Bhil warrior, he also carried a sword and a highly ornamented dagger. The Prince was puzzled, and determined to find out what he could in the matter. In the meantime, some instinct prompted him to treat the forest Chieftain with a courteous distinction, which caused the fair face to flush with pride, and the eyes of the young man to sparkle with pleasure.

The weeks passed by, and the warriors assembled in the cause of the Maharana began to chafe a little at the enforced idleness. Although much time was devoted to military exercises, in which the bowmen, under the leadership of the stranger, distinguished themselves frequently, yet the hours hung heavy in the camps and outposts. At last the news came that Prince Salim, the son of the Emperor Akbar, and his ally Man Singh were marching towards Mewar.

This was the signal for much merry-making and rejoic-

ing in the army of the Maharana; arms were tested, positions strengthened, fortresses re-visited, and an air of bustle, even hilarity, invaded the camps. For the suspense and the long wait were over.

Like the waves of the sea, the Mogul army poured into Rajasthan, and the weaker states which defended the outlying borders fell before the vast forces of Akbar. Full of pride at their rapid progress, they marched swiftly upon Mewar, across the grey, parched plains, past the ruined fortress of Chitor. All this seemed easy, and the complete defeat of Pratap Singh's forces but a question of time to the commanders who led the jubilant Turks against their hereditary foe. But their exuberance received a check when they came to the narrow entry which guarded the mountain fortresses against sudden invasion. The plain of Haldighat was a widening out of a narrow defile guarded by towering cliffs, fringed at the base with dense jungle, and rendered inaccessible by the deep ravines which only the forest tribes had ever explored. On every point, ledge and projection of these cliffs, the Rajput commander had planted his trusty Bhils, and guarding the pass, supported by twenty-two thousand of Mewar's finest fighting men, the Sesodia Prince waited for the enemy.

The Mogul commanders took hurried council together. To attempt to force the pass so strongly guarded might mean a severe repulse attended by great loss of men. The Moguls were superior in numbers and artillery, but the Rajputs had the great advantage of position, and their backs were to the mountain. At any time they could retreat, covered by the unerring bowmen, whose deadly arrows would cause havoc in the enemy ranks.

With deep chagrin the Mogul commanders realized that they had received a severe check—they had expected resistance, desperate encounters, heavy loss of men, but these masterly tactics displayed by Pratap Singh surprised and discomfited them.

It was already late in the spring, and they had marched leisurely from Delhi, never anticipating much delay in achieving the final defeat of Mewar. If the monsoon burst before they had accomplished it, they might find themselves in a sorry plight, forced to retire, pursued by these hardy hill-men, who feared neither flood nor torrent. The only course open to them was to encamp before Haldighat, and when all was ready force a battle.

From his position at the head of the pass, Pratap Singh saw the mighty camp spring up until as far as the eye could reach there seemed nothing but a sea of tents. Above the shamiana of Prince Salim flew the royal crescent, and beside it, over one scarcely less gorgeous, waved the standard of Raja Man Singh of Amber.

The heart of the Sesodia Prince grew hot with rage at the sight of a Rajput banner hoisted among the standards of the Mogul. He turned to the Chief of Salumbar, who watched with him from the heights, and said passionately, 'What can be baser than fighting one's own kinsmen, making common cause with an enemy of an alien race? Once I thought of Man Singh of Amber as a noble prince and a gallant Rajput. Now I know him as a traitor, a man who has sold his birthright for a handful of gold mohurs, and degraded his race forever by mixing his blood with that of the Turk!'

'Thank God!' exclaimed the Prince, 'that I have such men as you beside me in this our great and final struggle.'

'See Prince!' replied the old Chief smiling, 'how the crescent of the Moguls droops. Is it that the Sun upon the banner of Mewar has withered in pretensions?'

The night fell, a young moon hung for a while upon the horizon, then sunk behind the dark hills, where the flare of the torches and ruddy lights of camp fires showed the positions of the Rajput army. The men were merry enough up there in the passes and rocks. Little they cared for the tents of the enemy. Let the future take care of

itself; to-night they would sing again the old songs of war and chivalry. Down in the Mogul camp, the soldiers heard the Rajput songs, and in his splendid tent, Rana Man Singh, Chief of Amber, vassal of Akbar, heard them too, and a look half sad, half terrible, passed over his face. He thought of his careless youth, when ambition had not come to knock at the door of his honour. What were they singing up there in the mountains? The deeds of the heroic Prithviraj, the exploits of Sangram Singh? Once he had known these songs, but now he had no longer any right to remember them. At that moment he would have given up the whole of his splendour, all that he had won as the price of his treachery, to be sitting up there on the hill-side round the camp fires, listening to the bard and singing with the men of his own race.

He rose and passed out of the tent, to the sudden consternation of the guards. A Mogul officer passing by saluted hurriedly and stood at attention. 'They sing well, the men of Mewar,' said the Raja unexpectedly. The officer smiled contemptuously, and replied with a sneer, 'To-morrow they may weep, those that are left of them.' A sudden impulse to draw his sword swept over Man Singh. 'The alien dog! well for him that no Rajput spear forced the insult back down his throat!' Then he remembered that he too had become an alien to the Rajput warriors singing upon the hill-side, and with a sharp sigh he turned his eyes from where their torches and fires lit up the night, and proceeded towards the Royal shamiana.

Prince Salim lay stretched upon a luxurious couch, under a canopy of crimson satin. By his side, upon a richly carved table, stood a flagon of Damascus wine, and a little golden goblet. Pyramids of rare fruits, grapes from Kábul, golden oranges, pale yellow limes, crimson pomegranates and purple figs testified to the luxury with which the son of Akbar loved to surround himself. His musicians sat before him, playing so softly that the Prince, his head heavy from

the effects of the wine, was lulled almost to sleep, and lay dreaming on the soft cushions.

He was a handsome youth, strong and well knit, his broad brow unclouded by thought or care, his fine heavily-lidded eyes, and well shaped nose bespeaking a distinction that was contradicted by a heavy mouth and chin. His dress was of fine silk sumptuously decorated with embroidery, and his long, supple hands were ornamented by costly rings.

In spite of the fact that he was, in name at least, the head of his father's large army, the Prince looked as if he had not a responsibility in the world. Had he been told that the night was his last on earth, he would still have had his wine, his music, and his dreams.

He was disturbed from his pleasant ease by the sound of an arrival outside the tent, and a servant entered and announced that the Raja Man Singh waited upon His Highness.

With a little grimace of irritation, the Prince raised himself; signing to the attendants to remove the flagon of wine, and dismissing the musicians by a gesture, he commanded that the Raja should be brought to his presence. Preceded by his guard of honour, the famous commander entered, and bowing low to the Prince accepted the seat which was placed for him.

The two men were a direct contrast to each other, the one young, elegant, already showing the effects of a soft and self-indulgent life, the other, though of middle age, erect, and lean, with a face where intelligence and ambition met in an expression of haughty pride.

By his military genius and administrative ability Man Singh had raised himself to a high place in the confidence of Akbar, who had bestowed magnificent rewards upon him for services to the Mogul cause. At the Imperial court his position was second only to that of the Emperor, and though Prince Salim was nominally in command of this

expedition against the Prince of Mewar, it was to Raja Man Singh that Akbar entrusted the realization of his dearest ambition, the humiliation and destruction of Pratap Singh.

'And tell me, Raja,' said the Prince, after the customary greetings had been exchanged, 'have you satisfied yourself with our preparations against the enemy?'

'Everything is in readiness,' replied the Rajput; 'I see no reason why we should not commence hostilities even on the morrow. The season advances; before long the monsoon, which in this part of the country can burst with terrific force, may prove a more dangerous foe than the army of the Prince of Mewar.'

'By all means let us engage with the foe immediately,' agreed the Prince, to whom the idea of being cut off from the pleasures of Delhi for longer than necessary was a far from pleasing one. 'We can crush these Kaffirs easily enough!' he added jauntily.

For a moment Raja Man Singh hated the smiling confident face of Akbar's son. Every drop of Rajput blood in him boiled with indignation at the insult to his race. But wiser counsels prevailed, though his voice was cold as he answered, 'You underrate the Rajput, Sire. It will be no easy task to overcome Pratap Singh, and we may expect an encounter which will test our resources to their very utmost.'

'For an old soldier you talk fearfully,' laughed the Prince: 'the little band of this proud Rana will melt before our approach. Come, Man Singh! you don't agree—I see that by your face—tell me what bird of ill omen has been chattering in your ear?'

'It is no bird of ill omen that warns me that we may expect a hard-fought battle,' replied Man Singh. 'but my knowledge of the Sessdia Prince and of the great power he has over his adherents. It is true that we have far the greater numbers, that our men are loyal and brave fighters.

but yonder army is composed of warriors each man of whom has pledged himself to a sacred cause, and that cause is embodied in the person of Pratap Singh. He is more than their leader, more than their Prince; he is the sole surviving symbol of their ancient glory, and they will fight as men inspired by the Gods, so long as they can see the crimson banner of Mewar before their eyes.'

'Ah Raja!' said the Prince, with a touch of shrewd insight, 'your heart is not in this fight, but in spite of that I trust that you will do your best to carry Pratap Singh to Delhi.' A curious look came over the face of the Rajput, and he replied, 'Prince, nothing would please me better than to humble the Sesodia as once he humbled me.'

Salim leaned forward; he was interested, for it must be a bold man indeed who dared to insult Raja Man Singh of Amber. 'What is this?' he cried, 'some one has insulted one of the proudest Princes in all Hindustan, and that man still lives? Come tell me, Raja, how that comes about.'

The Raja did not answer immediately, and when he did it was not to gratify the Prince's curiosity, but to refer to their chances of the morrow. 'Pratap Singh is a brave and determined commander,' he said soberly; 'he has sworn a vow of eternal enmity to Delhi, and by that vow he lives. You speak lightly, Prince, of the battle on the morrow. It is but right to warn you that it will be no easy task to defeat Pratap Singh and his army.'

'Well, you have done your duty,' said the Prince with a wry smile. 'You have croaked like an old raven, but come now, tell me how Pratap Singh made of you such a bitter enemy.'

'The enemies of your illustrious father are the enemies of the Prince of Amber,' replied the Raja with frigid dignity. Prince Salim turned away with a touch of petulance. 'I do not wish for your confidence,' he said haughtily. 'I do not trust me evidently, Raja,' and then he

an inflection which held a warning note, 'the songs of the soldiers on yonder hill have awakened memories more potent than those of an Emperor's generosity. The climate of Mewar too, Raja, it may not suit you'—he paused significantly, and Man Singh realized that behind the lazy, smiling eyes of the Prince, lay concealed a keen and crafty brain. 'Your Highness,' he said frankly, 'no man likes to recount his own humiliation, but since you desire to learn why I have a personal reason to overcome the Prince of Mewar, I will tell you a story, and when it is finished, you shall judge whether I am likely to spare him on the morrow.'

CHAPTER 9

THE DISHONOURED GUEST

'It does not displease me to learn that you have no love for the Sesodia,' said Prince Salim, as he settled himself back upon his luxurious couch, and prepared to listen to the story that Man Singh was about to tell him, 'but, Raja, it may be that you recoil from fighting against men of your own blood. If this is so, then on the morrow stand apart from the battle, and I will lead our army against the forces of Mewar.'

Man Singh looked steadily at the Prince, but he could not see anything but indifference in the smiling eyes. He and his kinsmen, this feud and his revenge, all seemed of small import to the Emperor's son, to whom Pratap Singh appeared as little more than a hungry rebel to be punished for his presumption, after which the Moguls would return to the more civilized existence at Fatipore Sikri. How could Prince Salim grasp the deep significance of Pratap's resistance, or understand the motives that caused him to make this last great stand in the Rajput cause? But Man Singh understood, and not for a moment did he undervalue the strength of the Rajput forces, or hope for an easy victory on the morrow.

No doubt Prince Salim would like to take command, and the credit if the battle went to the Moguls, but Man Singh, who never for a moment swerved from his loyalty to his royal master Akbar, had no intention of allowing the Prince to command in anything more than name. He realized to the full Pratap's great influence over his followers, and with his intimate personal knowledge of the Rajput character, it was he, and he alone, who might really lead the Mogul troops to victory.

Prince Salim had spoken truly enough when he voiced Man Singh's repugnance to shedding the blood of his fellow countrymen, and it was only his great personal enmity to Pratap Singh and his lively sense of duty to his Imperial master that kept his heart in the forthcoming contest.

Prince Salim had yet to learn that a Rajput's allegiance once given cannot be withdrawn at will, and Man Singh, having become the vassal of Akbar, had deserted country and kinsmen for the Mogul cause. Nor did he waver, except for the brief moment when, sitting round the camp fires, the men of Mewar had sung the songs of Rajasthan.

'I thank you, Prince,' replied Man Singh, 'and I appreciate to the full the spirit which makes you suggest that I should not take up arms against the Rajputs but the debt of dishonour that I owe Prince Pratap Singh shall be paid in blood on the battlefield. The story I am about to tell you is an old one, but the memory of my humiliation is as fresh to-night as it was then. Listen, Prince, and you will know why my arm shall be strong on the morrow against the Sesodia.'

'I was returning to Hindustan from the conquest of Sholapur, and hearing that the Maharana of Mewar was in residence at Kumalmir, I turned aside from my route with the intention of meeting him. For you must know, Prince, that it has ever been the policy of your illustrious father to ingratiate himself with the Hindu rulers, and to show them the honour and courtesy due to them.'

lineage and personal valour. As the Emperor's ambassador I therefore invited myself to an interview with Prātap Singh, who accepting the suggestion, advanced to Udaisagar, with a handsome retinue to receive me.

'On the shores of the great lake he prepared a magnificent reception. A stately banquet was served on golden plates, and the chief nobles of his court stood around, awaiting the arrival of host and guest.

'I was attended by my suite, all men of high rank and distinction, and looked round to greet my distinguished host before taking the place assigned to me. To my surprise, and deep displeasure, I saw that he was not present, but that in his place waited his son the young Prince Amar Singh.

'I turned to Amar Singh and demanded the reason of his father's absence. The boy, with obvious uneasiness, replied that the Maharana was indisposed, but requested that the Raja should waive all ceremony, accept his welcome, and commence the repast. For a moment I was too angry to reply, but realizing that the time had not come for a reprisal, I rose from my seat and with cold dignity refused to partake of the food of a Rajput who had neglected the first rules of hospitality. For you must know, Prince, that a Rajput cannot show a greater breach of civility than to absent himself from the board to which he has invited a guest. Well, to proceed, the young Prince stood at a loss, his colour coming and going, his eyes seeking my face to gather from it what was passing in my mind. With a sign to my suite to follow, I prepared to withdraw saying, "Tell the Maharana that I can guess the cause of his illness, but if he will not serve me, then I cannot break my fast at his board."

' "My lord," replied the young Prince, and he spoke not without dignity for one of his age, "it is useless to conceal the reason of the Maharana's objection to eat with one who mingled the pure blood of the Rajput with that of the Turk, and takes his food with the alien."

'I left the feast untouched, save for a little rice, which it is customary to offer Annadeva, the god of food. Placing this in my turban, I withdrew, and mounting my horse I was on the point of departing from the scene of my humiliation, when the Maharana suddenly stood before me. Then my anger burst forth, and I cried out, "Never will I forget this day and the insult you have offered me. I came in friendship, to speak of an alliance, but all hope of such 'twixt you and me is past forever. Abide in peril, if such be your resolve. If I do not humble your pride to the dust, my name is not Man Singh of Amber." ' Man Singh paused for a moment, his face dark with the memory of his humiliation.

'And what did the rebel reply?' queried Prince Salim, who thought very little of Pratap Singh's ability to stand against the powerful Man Singh, if it came to a struggle between the two. 'He bowed, and remarked that he should be very glad to meet me in battle,' said Man Singh moodily, and then added with stern emphasis, 'so do not fear that my eyes will turn away from the sight of his destruction on the morrow, my Prince. Rather shall I seek myself to level that proud head to the earth, and silence forever that insolent tongue, yea ! though my own life be the price I pay.'

Prince Salim rose, and with a gesture of understanding, placed his arm round the shoulder of the Rajput. 'Raja Sahib !' he said earnestly, 'Your feud, your quarrel is mine. Together we will show this proud Pratap that we have not forgotten the feast on the shores of the lake at Udaisagar.'

Man Singh, returning the embrace of the Prince, thanked him warmly for this fresh mark of his confidence and esteem, and with every assurance of his loyalty and respect withdrew from the royal shamiana.

Outside the night was dark, and a chill wind blew from the hills. Here and there the ashes of a dying fire glowed red in the surrounding blackness. The Rajputs were sleeping before the battle of Haldighat.

CHAPTER 10

HALDIGHAT

The next day was the morning of the great battle. On one side was the countless host of the Mogul, and on the other the twenty-two thousand picked Rajputs of Pratap Singh; the former thirsting for revenge, the latter fighting for their independence. On one side the enormous regiments of Delhi, with their well equipped artillery and cavalry; on the other, the flower of Mewar's chivalry, each of the clans under its own chieftain.

Thus the two hosts faced each other.

The sun was just rising behind the long line of the Mogul camp. Prince Salim was in command of one wing, Man Singh of the other. In front was posted the formidable artillery, and the gunners had already loaded their ponderous guns, to which the Rajputs would have no reply. Seated on majestic elephants, the generals rode slowly down the lines. With superior numbers behind them, they felt confident of success, and as they passed along the serried ranks, they threw out here and there words of encouragement to their men.

Salim smiled, as if the issue of the battle were already decided; Man Singh's features wore an expression of sullen pride—a reflection of his mixed feelings. He knew too well that the battle would be desperate.

Pratap Singh had also completed his arrangements. He had dug no trenches, and erected no fortifications. Nor had he any heavy guns. The Rajputs, true to their tradition, were to trust to horse and lance, and to the sharp Rajput sword.

A body of Bhil archers, under a young leader who looked like a Rajput, and at whom men gazed curiously, had been cleverly posted on the broken ground at the entrance to the pass.

The suspense was suddenly broken by the boom of guns;

their shot tore great gaps in the Rajput ranks, and then the Mogul army advanced at the double.

As they reached the rocky heights, an avalanche of great boulders crashed down upon them, and a shower of arrows, thick as hail, smote upon them from above. The Moguls wavered for a moment, then rallied, but just in time, for the Rajput horsemen, lance in hand, were upon them in a flash.

After the first shock of the charge, it was a confused hand-to-hand fight. Amid the din and welter of the fray could be seen the Rana, on his favourite steed, the fury of the battle within him, his sword flashing like lightning as it rose and fell. Man after man he cut down, till he came within sight and hearing of Man Singh.

'Traitor,' he cried, 'Dog of Delhi, but for these Turks you would not have been alive. Know you not that the Rajput trusts to his own sword, not to the help of hirelings? Ah, yes, you have forgotten all that, since you rot at Delhi and pick the bones thrown to you.'

These bitter words might well have fired Man Singh to single combat, had not a group of men driven the royal elephant away.

With added fury Pratap turned towards the wing where Salim was seated on the Imperial elephant; before his onset and his mighty shout the ranks of the enemy gave way and divided; like a rushing torrent his Rajputs poured through the breach, their spears and swords flashing in the afternoon sun. The Mogul line was broken, their artillery was scattered. On came the men of Mewar, till they stood before Salim, the Emperor's son.

For a moment there was a deathlike silence, each side dumb in deep suspense, as the two Princes glared at one another. For a moment only; the next instant each side had gathered round its lord; then Mogul and Rajput closed in fierce battle, the like of which Rajasthan had not witnessed for many a year. Terrible to hear were the wild

shouts, the dying groans, the clash of steel. Men fell like rotten trees before the storm, and the ground was covered with the dead and dying.

In a few minutes the bodyguard that had stood round Salim was scattered, and Pratap, but a few paces from the Imperial elephant, was aiming his spear at the throat of the unfortunate Prince. In agonized suspense Salim gazed helplessly, as if fascinated by the prowess of the terrible Rajput. Then, sickened at the sight of his imminent danger, he turned his eyes away. But the great spear whizzed past the Prince's head and buried itself in the side of the howdah.

Salim was saved! For once Pratap Singh had missed his aim. Enraged at his failure and at the loss of his spear, Pratap set spurs to his brave steed Chetak, and the next instant it was upon its haunches with its fore-feet over the trunk of the elephant. With a blow from his axe the Rana dislodged the mahout; as his mighty arm was raised to smite the Prince, the elephant, maddened by its wounds, turned and ran.

Once more the Gods had been kind to Salim. But Pratap and his men came on in stern pursuit. The fleeing animal thundered through the Mogul ranks, and hard behind him rode the Rajput leader. With blank gaze the Moguls started at his strength and daring, and in their heart of hearts admired the rider and his gallant steed.

But the Moguls were no cowards. They could not stand by and see their Prince pursued. With renewed strength and vigour they closed in and the Rajput advance was stayed. They too were warriors, even as the Rajputs, and fanatic fighters against the Kaffir foe. With a shout of 'Allah Ho Akbar' they closed, in a fierce rush, round Pratap and his brave band. For them retreat was impossible. But they too could not endure defeat. They saw that their Prince was in danger, his retreat cut off. Quickly grasping the situation, they made a ring round their leader, and rained blows upon the Moguls as they surged around. It was

a handful against a host, but desperately they fought on. Pratap himself had been severely wounded. From seven wounds his blood was flowing, but he fought on unheeding.

The fierce struggle round the Rana brought up the Rajputs from outside. Whatever befell, the Rana must be saved; in a compact body, with the flag of the Sesodias waving above them, they fought their way to the rescue and joined hands with their compatriots.

Then, after a deadly struggle, they cut their way through the Mogul masses, and brought Pratap back to safety. Thousands perished in that struggle, and the warm blood of these brave men sank into the earth like water on a thirsty soil.

Once again Pratap, with the fury of battle upon him, entered the fray and charged the Mogul lines. But he was tempting fortune too far. The Moguls were thoroughly roused; in a furious assault they swept round him like a wave; he and his men were again cut off, and retreat seemed a thing impossible.

The Moguls felt they had their enemy in their clutches; determined now to end the activities of this rebel, and to avenge the insult hurled at their commander Man Singh, they pressed ever harder round the little band.

In vain Pratap and his men plied axe and sword; the Moguls would not be repulsed and fought like one man. Outside, the Rajputs sickened at the thought that their leader was again entrapped. Desperately they tried to reach him, but in vain; their ranks had been sadly thinned, while the Mogul host seemed more numerous than ever. Again and again the Rajputs hurled themselves against the serried ranks of the enemy, but in vain. It seemed only a question of time before the Maharana was taken prisoner.

Seated on his horse, by the entrance of the pass, which he had stoutly defended against the Mogul attacks, was Mana, the aged Dilwara Chief. He saw that the

Rana, thought for a moment, and murmured a few words of prayer. Then, waving his curved sword on high, he called to his men. 'The Rana is in danger,' he shouted; 'men of Jhala, follow me to save your lord.'

A few swift orders formed the horsemen, lance in hand, ready to charge; behind them, in close order, with sword and spear, the infantry fell in. They were but a thousand all told, but they were picked men, and their great moment had come. The Chief gave the word; the cavalry dashed forward and in a moment they had crashed into the swaying mass of the enemy.

Many a brave horseman fell, but their impact carried them on to where the mighty Pratap was fighting for his life. Behind them came the Jhala infantry, who fell upon the shaken foe. And then the Moguls closed round Mana and his men and the clansmen had need of all their strength and valour.

One thought filled their minds and nerved their arms—the rescue of their lord.

In the thick fray round the Maharana could be seen the royal standard, the crimson banner with its golden sun, as it swayed this way and that.

Now warding off a Mogul sword-stroke with his shield, now cutting down a foeman in his way, the Chief, with his captains close beside him, was almost by the Rana's side.

'Give me the standard,' shouted the Chief, his words barely audible above the din of battle; in an instant the golden sun was snatched up, and was moving away from the royal person. After it streamed the thickest of the fight, while others of Mana's men escorted the weary Pratap from the field.

It still needed sharp fighting before the old Chief and his horsemen cut their way to the fringes of the fight, and rode back to the temporary safety of the rocks overhanging the pass. There sat the Maharana, now dismounted,

and bleeding from his wounds, which at last he had suffered an attendant to bind up.

He had been brought back in triumph, but the triumph had been purchased at a heavy price. As he rode up, the old Chief reeled in his saddle, and had a friendly hand not sustained him, he would have fallen to the ground.

Gently they lifted him from his horse, but his wound was mortal, and he knew that his end had come. It was the one he would have chosen for himself.

With tears blinding his eyes, the Maharana bent over the dying chief. 'Bravest among men,' he cried, 'you have saved my life; but at what a cost. Ah, how can I repay you this service, beloved and noble brother?'

Faintly the dying man made answer: 'Maharana, it were not well that my lord should weep over the death of his servant. The clan of Jhala knows its duty well, and they have not fought in vain.'

The Rana's grief was too deep for words; silently he kneeled down, took the hands of the dying Chief and kissed them. The Chief smiled—a smile so serene that the stern warrior's eyes again filled with tears—and with that smile the faithful spirit passed away.

On that memorable day, of the twenty-two thousand, fourteen thousand were left upon the fatal field, and the hearts of the survivors were heavy within them as they withdrew. Outnumbered and outgunned, they had done all that brave men could do. Victory, but victory alone, rested with the Moguls. Never did they forget that bloody day; long afterwards, when the men who had fought at Haldighat were old and grey, in fair Delhi and in the far south, in Deccan and Bengal, they would tell their sons and grandsons of that wondrous battle and of the valour of the Rajputs.

With aching heart Pratap remounted the gallant Chetak, and cast a backward glance at the stricken field. Fourteen thousand of his brave men had perished; wi

gladly, they had given up their lives to win the liberty of their native land.

But it was no time to meditate. The Moguls had been sorely smitten, but they held the field. Already the pursuit was beginning.

A small band of followers, faithful to the last, still held by the Rana. But he would no longer endanger these gallant lives.

'Scatter, and save yourselves,' he cried; and with that order he rode off swiftly and alone.

CHAPTER 11

THE BROTHERS

Sorely wounded, utterly disheartened and weary, Pratap Singh fled from the tragic field of Haldighat. His horse, the noble Chetak, though bleeding profusely from a sword cut, still carried him bravely towards the mountains. At first the Maharana thought that he was not followed, but suddenly the sound of horses' hoofs told him that he must ride for his life. With voice and spur he urged on his brave steed, who, though weak from weariness and loss of blood, now broke into a gallop, in a desperate endeavour to out-distance those thudding hoofs behind them. But it was useless, the pursuers gained, and turning in his saddle. Pratap saw three Mogul Chieftains, almost upon him. In front foamed a mountain stream, an almost impossible leap, but with the courage of desperation, the fugitive leaned over his horse's neck and urged him forward. 'Chetak, old friend,' he cried, 'over! over!' and the noble beast, straining every aching muscle, cleared the torrent and raced on. Behind them the pursuers, checked by the stream, lost ground, but soon Pratap, looking again to see how near they were, saw but one where there had been three. The single rider was now almost level with Chetak and his rider; nothing for it now but to turn and face the foe. With a masterly feat

of horsemanship the Prince wheeled round, just as a cheerful voice called out in his native tongue, 'Ho ! nilar ghora ka swar ! (Ho ! rider of the blue horse). The horseman was his brother !

Drawing his sword, Pratap faced his kinsman, prepared to defend his life to the last, but with a merry laugh Sakta called out, 'A nice chase you've given me, brother; put up your sword, for I have no quarrel against you !'

In amazement, the Maharana sat silent; then, finding words at last, he said, 'But how come you here; where are your companions?'

'At the bottom of the ravine, with a lance thrust apiece,' replied Sakta unconcernedly. "Once I sought your life, Patta, but that is long since, and the memory of our feud is wiped out by your gallant deeds on the field of Haldighat. I saw you there, like a winged hero on your blue horse, and I said to myself, "If at the end of the day we both live then I will offer the hand of friendship to one who fought so gloriously for Mewar." You left the field, and I, pretending pursuit, came after you with the Moguls who now lie at the bottom of the torrent, the best place for all such as them;' and Sakta laughed again; he could never remain serious for long. Deeply moved by the generous action of his brother, Pratap dismounted, and going forward embraced him cordially; 'I thought I had lost all,' he said with deep emotion, 'but, Sakta, dear companion of my childhood, happy ends the day that reconciles us.'

Pratap still held the rein of Chetak over his arm, when with a deep long-drawn breath the good horse sank to the ground, and with one look of almost human devotion in his eyes, died at the feet of his master.

'I have lost a friend even as I have gained one,' said Pratap sadly, as he knelt beside the dead horse; 'and who now will carry me to safety? Ah ! Chetak, would that we had both fallen on the battlefield rather than that I should see you perish.'

'It was a good horse, that one,' agreed Sakta ruefully, 'and gave the lead across the stream to my Ankara here'. Then a light broke through the unaccustomed gloom on his face, 'And only Ankara could bear the burden of Mewar royalty. Here, take my horse, Patta, and may he carry you as well and leap your difficulties as nimbly as Chetak did;' and the generous Rajput set to buckling on the Maharana's caparison, placing it instead of his own on his favourite horse.

'And now I must say farewell,' he said, 'and return to tell the Mogul Prince how well I harassed you; but tell me, how did it feel flying for your life?' To which Pratap replied gravely, 'No Rajput flies the field joyfully.' 'Well said, and like you, Patta,' rejoined Sakta; 'farewell, and be assured that I will tell some pretty talk to the Turk; whether he believe it or not is another matter. Farewell, and good fortune attend your cause, which still is mine.' A light of great joy passed over the sad, stern face of the Maharana. 'Do you mean that you will come back to us?' he asked eagerly. 'If God wills,' replied Sakta, suddenly serious; 'would that I have never carried arms against you, brother,' and with a look of deep affection, not unmixed with regret, the two brothers parted, the Maharana to gallop off on the spirited Ankara, who from a colt had known every bridle-path in the Aravali district, and the generous Sakta to return to the Mogul camp and explain as best he could how he had allowed the valuable prize to slip through his fingers.

Prince Salim received him with unconcealed displeasure. 'You rode slowly, Sakta Singh,' he said coldly.

'Nay, my lord,' replied the wily Rajput, 'if I may say so, I rode fast, but the rider of the blue horse rode faster.'

'And my soldiers who went with you?' questioned the Prince. 'Would those who saw the Sesodia at Haldighat marvel that he accounted for two men? Nay, if it had been ten, the tale would have been the same,' replied Sakta

'It shall be yours, Sakta, yours to have and to hold, for you and those that come after you; it is a grant of conquest, and Bhainsror shall be the future abode of the Saktawats.' 'Which is better than a seat on the right hand of the Turk,' quoth the new Chief of the Saktawats contentedly.

'But tell me, brother, who led your bowmen at Haldighat? A sharper shower of arrows I have never seen than those discharged from the heights. The Bhils are good marksmen, 'tis true, but such a masterly display of tactics on their part took me by surprise; I, who know them well, cannot remember such a combination of skill and discretion. There was a time when they almost saved the day, when they came down the mountain side like a flock of birds, and from the lower level opened a murderous attack upon the left wing of the Mogul cavalry.'

'I too marvelled,' replied Pratap Singh; 'there is a mystery about the identity of their leader. He is a Rajput, Sakta, of that I am sure.'

'A Rajput!' echoed Sakta, 'wherefore would a Rajput place himself at the head of the band of savages?'

'Do you remember Tilak Singh of Rathor?' asked the Maharana unexpectedly.

'Ah, there was a man!' rejoined the enthusiastic Sakta, 'but he fell defending Chitor, so the tale goes.'

'Yes, he fell in with Sahidas,' said Pratap.

'But what made you think of Tilak Singh?' asked Sakta; 'we were talking of your bowmen and their mysterious leader.' 'And that leader reminded me of Tilak Singh,' said Pratap; 'there was a son, you know, who should have ruled over Surya Mahal, but Durja Singh the Chandrawat, that man of blood and iron, now holds sway over the fortress. No doubt the child met his death when the stronghold changed hands, but still, when I see that Bhil Chieftain, for as such he passes, I feel that the spirit of Tilak Singh is not lost to Mewar.'

CHAPTER 12

TEJ SINGH AND THE BHILS

Some months had passed away since the battle of Haldighat. In the soft twilight of a summer evening Tej Singh was walking up the steep mountain path that led to the home of the Bhils.

On the woody slopes, surrounded by green patches of cultivation, stood the rugged dwellings of the hill and forest folk.

Long before the high-born Rajputs won for themselves the land of Mewar, the Bhils and other wild tribes had made their home in Rajasthan. But as the conquerors claimed more and more of the valleys and slopes of the Aravali, the aboriginal people, who were unable to resist the new comers, retired further and further into the depths of the forests and the fastnesses of the hills. Here they remained undisturbed, even by the Rajputs, who came to regard them not as enemies but as useful allies in the time of war, for these wild men were hardy and brave, expert bowmen, and faithful to the Chiefs of their adoption. Their dwellings, built of rough-hewn rocks, clustered together in the most inaccessible parts of the hills or jungles. Should an enemy attempt to force their retreats, he rarely lived to return, so that in time these independent, simple people were left alone to pursue their lives unmolested.

Imitating the system of their overlords the Rajputs, they formed themselves into clans, each with its own Chief, who in his turn placed himself under the rule of the Rathor, the Chandrawat or such Rajput Chief as had claimed their fealty.

In times of danger they banded themselves together and fought shoulder to shoulder against the enemy. Treachery to their Chief was unknown, and they never failed to remember an obligation. Absolutely fearless, they were a strong ally against the invading Moguls, for from the sur-

rounding hills their deadly arrows made the narrow defiles more dangerous than the entry to a tiger's lair.

They were very poor, and as the Rajputs could pay them little for their military services, it was not unusual for a rich merchant travelling towards Agra and Delhi to be held up by a wild horde of savage-looking bowmen, and though he might escape with his life, he would be unable to save any of his merchandise. And so the Bhils lived, as best they could, often hungry, clad in coarse loin-cloths, their matted hair hanging round their dark faces, savages perhaps, but possessing one beautiful virtue—that of loyalty.

Of all these things Tej Singh thought as he stood upon the hill side.

The band who had rescued him when he escaped from Surya Mahal had acknowledged his father Tilak Singh as their overlord, and upon his death and the loss of the fortress, had transferred their allegiance not to the Chandrawat Durja Singh but to the son of their late Chief.

But now the Maharana had need of Tej Singh and all personal considerations must be sunk in the common cause of Mewar.

He had fought at Haldighat with conspicuous valour, leading his contingent of half-clad bowmen as valiantly as if they had been the pick of the Rajput army. And they had followed him to a man, glorying in his leadership, for they loved him, him whom they had saved from death, so that he might rule over them as Tilak Singh had done.

He now made his way toward the little fort of the hill where Bhim Chand, the Chief of the Bhils, lived in rude state. Bhim Chand had been an old and faithful vassal of Tilak Singh, and for eighteen years had held his primitive stronghold against the enemy.

A group of older men had gathered round the wood fire, to smoke their chillims and to pass an hour or so in talk with the Chief. The women were busy cooking the evening meal, and hosts of children tumbled about, or squatted as



DURJA SINGH SWUNG HIS MIGHTY MACE

near as they could get to the cheerful blaze, for the air was sharp and cold when the sun went down.

Bhim Chand was a powerful man, with muscles of iron, his skin burnt almost black from exposure to the sun and wind, and as he sat by the fire, his strong frame lit up by the fitful glow from the burning logs, he made an impressive figure of rugged strength. At heart he was as simple as a child, his whole life filled by two ideas, devotion to his overlord, and a passionate love for Girija his only daughter.

Two strangers were present in the camp of the Bhils that night; one was the aged Gokuldas, he whose son had been slain by the orders of Durja Singh, the other a Bhumia Chief, whose land lay not far away from the abode of Bhim Chand.

The erect demeanour of Gokuldas had suffered somewhat since his bitter meeting with the arrogant Durja Singh in the village of Chandrapur, and his broad shoulders were bowed; the fire in his eyes held something of wildness; the flame of revenge, fanned by added grievance, gave their sunken depths a brightness that contrasted strangely with his wan cheeks and long white hair. He sat silently among the talkers, his gaze fixed upon the far distant line of cloud that marked the Vindhya mountains.

Suddenly one of the number espied the tall, graceful figure of Tej Singh approaching up the narrow rocky track, and called out, 'Here comes the Rathor'; the whole company joined in a shout of welcome, for Tej Singh was a favourite with them all. Seating himself some paces away from the gratified Bhim Chand, the youth joined in talking over the events of the past few weeks. The battle of Haldighat was still fresh in their minds, and enthusiasm ran high over the wonderful feats of the Rajput forces, especially the heroism of Pratap Singh, and the noble sacrifice of the aged Chief of Dilwara. Tej Singh himself came in for no small amount of praise, for the Bhils were delighted at the havoc they had wrought amongst the ranks of the Moguls, gloating over the

rout they had caused in the flank upon which they had concentrated.

'There is no weapon like the bow,' declared Tej Singh, and his remark called forth a chorus of approval, for every man there was a bowman first and foremost, even if on occasion he carried a sword.

Then the talk came round to Surya Mahal, for it was the dearest ambition of the Bhils to establish Tej Singh once more in the stronghold that the Rathors had held for more than three generations.

Old Gokuldas, who had remained silent during the animated talk, now rose from his place, and raising his hand above his head said in solemn tones, 'By all that I hold sacred I swear that I will win back Surya Mahal for Tej Singh the Rathor, and destroy the tyrant Durja Singh.'

The assembled company looked at each other uneasily. The oath was a wild and strange one for this aged man to utter. How could he aid Tej Singh to recapture the fortress? And yet his words carried conviction, to Tej Singh at least, who with the warmest expression of regard, thanked the old man for his loyal words.

The rest of the company, fired by the example of Gokuldas, with one accord pledged their faith to the Rathor cause, and it was upon a scene of excitement and good fellowship that the old lord of the Bhumias, Devisingh, entered the space where they were sitting.

Tej Singh rose at once upon the entrance of the venerable Chief, and, embracing him as was the custom, greatly delighted Devisingh by this mark of attention and respect. He had grown old in the service of the Rathors, and had witnessed the ascent of Tilak Singh to the gadi of Surya Mahal.

'Tej Singh!' he said earnestly, 'I could die in peace if I saw you restored to the home of your fathers. I heard the brave words of the good Gokuldas, and though I owe no great personal grudge as he does to Chandrawa'

Chief, yet his oath shall be mine. My sword and those of my retinue are yours when the time comes.'

'Revered Uncle,' replied Tej Singh, 'I thank you for your brave words, and for the offer of your aid. The hope of regaining my inheritance is but a faint one, for we all know that Durja Singh will put up a very stout resistance, and that he always has a large number of trained warriors at his command.' 'A thousand men, no more!' broke in the Bhil Chieftain; 'he lost grievously at Haldighat.' 'And Gokuldas here can raise as many,' said the Bhumia Chief; 'my men too are with you, ready and willing to lay down their lives for the son of Tilak Singh!' 'Remember our bowmen at Haldighat,' threw in Bhim Chand, 'they know the country round about Surya Mahal as well as their own hillside,' and the Bhils who had followed Tej Singh, cheered lustily until the echoes rang from the rocks around.

'I thank you friends,' said Tej Singh very simply, 'and when the Maharana has no further need of our swords, or bows, and our lives, then I will remember your brave promises to-night.'

'But why this delay?' asked Devisingh, a little disappointed that the challenge to Durja Singh should not be given immediately, and the whole company turned towards Tej Singh where he stood, a gracious figure in the light of the camp fire. His young face was grave and yet serene; his dark eyes shone with a lofty purpose.

'While Chitor languishes in the hands of the Mogul, let us think of naught but to redeem her,' he said. 'Our first duty is to rally round the standard of the Maharana, until the Turks are driven out of Rajasthan and the ancient capital is restored to her former glory. Then, then, good friends and true, it will be time to think of our little feuds and petty quarrels.' There was silence for a few seconds after this frank and selfless speech of the young Rathor; then old Devisingh rose, and laying his hand upon Tej

Singh's shoulder, said, 'Be it as you say. First we will drive the Moguls from Chitor, and then right the wrong that has been done to you, true lord of Surya Mahal.'

Tej Singh could not speak for the emotion that the old Chief's words had aroused, but he gave all his loyal supporters a look of deep affection and gratitude, and they understood.

Someone pulled his arm from behind, once, and then again impatiently, and turning he saw the young son of Devisingh, who had listened unseen to the whole proceedings. 'How now, Chandan,' he cried, 'what brings you here amongst grown warriors? There is yet time for you to hear such talk.'

Chandan laughed delightedly, and squaring his arms in an attitude of some doughty wrestler, replied, 'Once when we were together at Surya Mahal, you promised to take me to the battle-fields with you.'

'To be sure I did,' agreed Tej Singh, 'but that was to be when you were a man. Now what would a boy of sixteen do against an army of Turks? Oh, yes! I know you are brave, but you must wait, and listen! your father grows old and needs you by his side.' Chandan hung his head; he was bitterly disappointed that Tej Singh would not accept him; but the Rathor took both his hands, and looking him in the eyes, continued, 'Remember that you are of true Rajput stock, and cannot have your sword tarnished by a defeat.'

These words went straight to the heart of the boy, and drawing out his sword he flourished it mightily, much to the delight of the assembled warriors, who cheered to the echo his brave words that never a Turk should enter the fortress of Bhingarh, or live to tell the tale.

CHAPTER 13

THE CHARAN'S SONG.

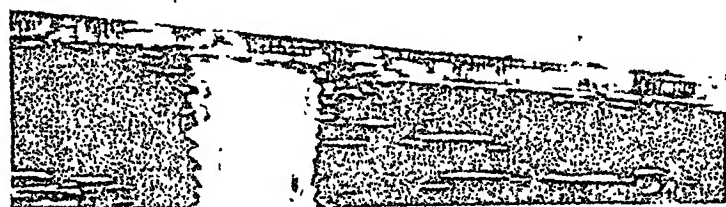
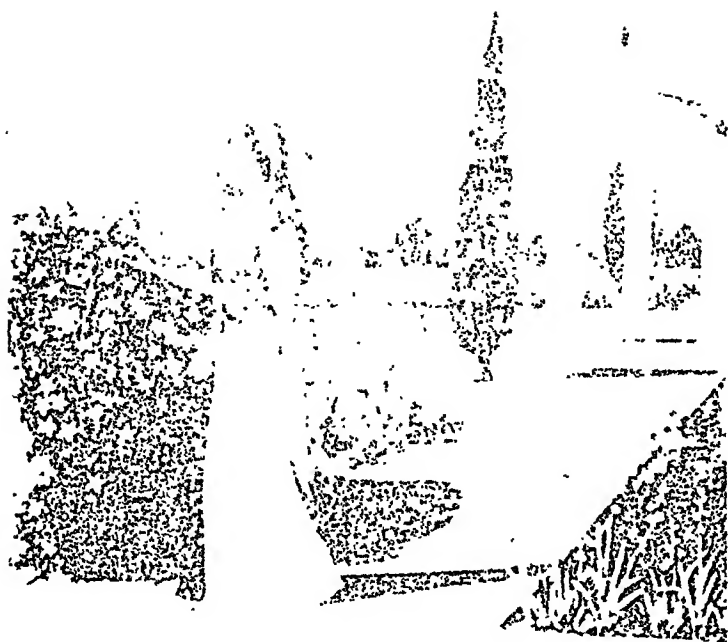
In the stillness of the night Pushpkumari walked in the garden. The dew lay heavy on each leaf and flower as they lay bathed in the pure moonlight. She sighed as she wandered along quaint paths, the silk of her sari caught by long tendrils of the mogra bushes; the beauty of the night, the scent of the flowers filled her heart with longing, that heart which beat for one alone, the exile, Tej Singh. She gathered a few jessamine buds, and seating herself upon a rough stone bench, wove the delicate blossoms into a garland for her hair, and having some flowers left she made a little bracelet.

Where was Tej Singh to-night? Did he still live and if so, remember her? It was so long since they had met; his name was never spoken in Sūrya Mahal, for Durja Singh, a stern warrior more than twice her age, upon whom she had always looked as a rough but indulgent guardian, had been bewitched by her delicate beauty and now sought to win her as his bride. Proudly she had rejected his advances, proudly reminded him of her early troth. He had been angry, but she remained firm, though the words with which he taunted her upon a lover who made no sign, brought the blush of shame to her face and caused her dark eyes to flash dangerously, she had answered him with scornful decision.

'Think you, my lord, that a Rajput maiden makes a promise only to break it? If I can never be the bride of the Rathor Tej Singh, then I will die unwed.'

At her brave words Durja Singh had given an ugly laugh; and something in his eyes reminded Pushpkumari that though so far her bonds had been light, she was really his prisoner and in his power.

If only Tej Singh would claim her! There had been rumours that he was dead; those who had seen him fighting



gloriously at Haldighat, feared that his valour would carry him to death. But in her heart she knew that he lived though he made no sign.

In the bosom of her robe she carried a little dagger, and if Durja Singh pressed his suit too hard she knew what to do. These were sad stern thoughts for a beautiful girl, and her dark eyes filled with tears of self pity, as she pondered on her fate.

How beautiful the night was, how tranquil, and hark! somewhere a voice was singing, accompanied by the soft twang of the veena. Perhaps a wandering Charan, tuning his lay to the charm of the moonlit night. The song was very sweet, and Pushpkumari rose, a sudden desire to hear the words leading her steps in the direction from which the music came.

Then she saw the singer. He was leaning up against the rough trunk of a Bakul tree, his face turned towards the place. He had not seen her, and she slipped noiselessly behind a thick clump of bushes. How her heart beat—she feared the Charan must hear it, but unconscious of a listener he sang on and now she heard the words—

‘Hearken ye women and girls of Rajasthan, of the glory of Mewar and its daughters I sing.

Hearken, gay ladies, to the story of a girl who kept her troth.

A boy and a girl once loved each other.

And as the days passed they grew up, and she promised to be his wife.

And know ye well, the women of Rajasthan break not their word.

The long days passed, the years went on their way.

The youth became a wanderer—perhaps was dead.

Who can tell?

And the world smiled and remembered him no more.

But did she remember him no more?

The women of Rajasthan know how to keep a promise.

A strong man of the Chandrawats loved her too. He was brave and the fame of his deeds flashed like the lightning of the Aravali to far-off Fatipore Sikri where the Emperor held his court. And all his fame and strength he laid down at her feet.

But did she choose him?

She told him that she belonged to a Rathor chieftain, and that she would choose no other. The Chandrawat grew angry, but threats, commands, requests, pleadings were of no avail.

She stood defiant, she would choose death itself rather than be false to her troth.

But alas! where is the Rathor Chieftain? Does the earth no longer bear his burden? Nay, not so. He lives.

A Rajput girl could keep a promise, wherefore, could a Rajput Prince forget?

Ah no, he lives and waits.'

Pushpkumari listened to this strange song with beating heart. It seemed to tell a story so like her own, and forgetting her timidity in her strong desire to learn the identity of the singer, she stepped out from her place of concealment and met him face to face.

She could see he was young and handsome, though a scarf covered the lower part of his face. For a moment they looked at each other without saying anything, then the minstrel bowed low and said—'Lady, have no fear, I am but a poor wandering Charan. If you bid me to depart, I will go instantly.'

His words reassured Pushpkumari, who replied gently, 'Tell me, strange Charan, who taught you your pretty song?'

A smile lit up the dark eyes of the singer; 'A wanderer like myself taught me the song,' he said, then added, 'one who was an exile from the home of his fathers, forgotten and alone.'

Pushpkumari sighed, 'Alas! in these days

bloodshed many have lost all that made life happy,' she said.

'But you, lady, should know nothing but joy,' said the Charan, 'while I am forced to wander over the wide world singing of the days that are gone.'

'I too am friendless and alone,' said Pushpkumari sadly, and then with some vague hope that she might learn something of one who was never absent from her thoughts, she added, 'Is he who taught you your song still in the land of the living?'

The Charan made a step forward, and spoke impetuously, 'Indeed lady, he lives, though at Haldighat he was ever in the thickest of the fray. Those who saw him there thought that he sought death, but he lives,' and the Charan paused for a moment, then said in a lower tone, 'he lives and waits.'

Pushpkumari was very disturbed at this strange speech, but she felt sure now that the Charan knew something about Tej Singh, and so, conquering her wish to run back to the palace, she mustered all her courage and said bravely, 'Listen, strange Charan, you who wander about the world, seeing and hearing things which are hidden from a maiden who is cut off from the outside world, tell me have you news of Tej Singh the Rathor—whom the world say is dead, but who, my heart tells me, still lives?'

'Ah,'—the Charan seemed strangely elated by the maiden's speech—'it is well, lady, that you have asked me this, for it was Tej Singh who taught me my song. I am his messenger, and he bade me discover whether you had forgotten the days when you talked with him upon the battlements of Surya Mahal.'

'It is not I who have forgotten,' replied Pushpkumari proudly. 'The women of Rajasthan know how to keep a promise,' so you sing, Charan, and you tell me that Tej Singh taught you the song.' 'Yes he taught me my song,' replied the Charan, 'and he gave me a token to carry to

the lady that was true, if she would accept it,' and he drew from his own finger a little ring set with a single opal.

'But how do you know that the token is for me?' asked Pushpkumari, and her breath came and went in hope and suspense.

'Lady!' replied the Charan, 'there could be no other. Take the ring if you will, and let me go hence and tell the Rathor how you received it.'

He still held the little ring in his hand, and the opal flashed and sparkled in the moonlight. Pushpkumari hesitated; she wanted—oh so much!—to take the ring, but it seemed strange that this Charan should be the messenger of Tej Singh. Why did he not come himself?

The Charan seemed to read her thoughts, for he said gravely: 'How can a wanderer and an exile aspire to a noble Rajputni? Tej Singh the Rathor must first prove that he is a true knight before he returns to claim her promise.'

'Tell him,' said Pushpkumari 'that the lady is true, and though it be for years she will keep her troth,' and she stretched out her hand to take the ring.

With a gesture of graceful respect, the Charan bent upon one knee and slipped the ring on to her finger. 'And I may tell my master that you will wear the ring for his sake, and that while it rests upon your finger he may hope?' he enquired in a low tone. 'I will wear it for his sake,' murmured Pushpkumari, and then holding out the bracelet of jessamine buds that she had woven, she added 'and if he will accept it, give him this poor offering from me, in memory of another that I made for him in the happy days gone by.'

Then, without further look or word, she sped on light feet in the direction of the palace, leaving the Charan standing with the frail bracelet in his hand. Drawing a little purse of silk from the bosom of his tunic, he opened it and took out a circlet of flowers now brown and faded. For a

moment he stood gazing, gazing first at the new token and then at the old. With tender care he placed both back in the little purse, and hiding it once more in his tunic, looked for a moment towards the palace of Surya Mahal, and with a sigh turned towards the forest and went back to his lonely exile.

CHAPTER 14

SURYA MAHAL

Among the staunch supporters of the Mewar cause, none had acquitted themselves more bravely at Haldighat than the Chandrawats led by Durja Singh of Surya Mahal. Though the Chief himself had escaped with his life, he returned to his fortress with a sorry heart, for the flower of the clan had fallen upon the battlefield, and his retinue was sorely diminished. Scarcely a warrior that did not bear some wound, and the audience hall was filled with men whose half-healed scars pointed to their recent part in the great conflict.

But in spite of the heavy losses of the clan, the men and women of the citadel had prepared a right royal welcome to their Chief and those that returned with him. The dwellings were gay with flags and banners, and the women were singing glad songs to greet the return of the heroes.

Durja Singh looked taller and sterner than ever as he took his seat among the Chieftains. This should have been his hour of rejoicing, but the reverses of Haldighat and the flight of Pratap Singh were fresh in his mind. He glanced round at the assembled company, noting that scarce fifty of his personal bodyguard still remained to him. How long could this unequal struggle continue? How long could flesh and blood support this dread burden of constant war and its attendant hardships? He rose from his seat wearily, for the campaign had exhausted him body and soul, but he spoke as was his wont with stern decision, every word chosen deliberately to express his meaning clearly.

'Warriors,' he said, 'you were all with me at the grim battle of Haldighat, and witnessed the selfless heroism of our clan. We gave of our best that day for the glory of Mewar, and those of you who have returned merit a respite from the bloodshed and the rigours of war. I do not see among you one man who has not his scar of personal valour, and would that I could spare you for a time, so that you might all rest and recover from what you have endured. But Raja Man Singh will return. His thirst for the blood of his kinsmen is not slaked, and while the Sesodias have blood to shed, it should be offered up gladly for the cause of the Maharana. Before the monsoon is over Prince Salim will come again, and with his mighty force batter our defences, so long as we have a man left to hold the crimson banner aloft. Tell me, are you ready once more to offer your lives for Mewar?'

The men, fired by the stern eloquence of their Chief, raised their lances and cried back with one accord,

'We are ready O, Chief!'

The rigid lines in the gaunt face of Durja Singh softened at the unquenchable spirit of his clansmen. The bravest of the brave himself, he could appreciate bravery in others. It was the one quality that appealed to his hard nature and never failed to call forth his approbation.

Calling for the bard, as was the custom on state occasions, he desired that the ballad of Haldighat should be sung. Amid the enthusiastic attention of the warriors, all of whom had played some great part on that fatal day, the song grew from the simple lay of the Rajput, to a passionate pæan of praise in honour of the Chandrawats.

To have fought in the thick of the fray, and to live to hear the exploits of the clan sung by the Charan—what greater joy could Rajput soldier have? On the scarred faces of the returned warriors rested an expression of pride and delight, and as each gallant deed was faithfully recounted by the bard, and the great tale swelled to a triumphant close, a

mighty cheer rent the air and men once more raised their lances aloft, pledging themselves to the service of their beloved Mewar.

Then entered a strange bard, young and of graceful mien, dressed in a fashion unknown to any of those present. Although his features could scarcely be seen through the veil of long hair that hung down so as almost to conceal them, they gave an impression of grave beauty. He told them he was a bard from the north, that he had sung from court to court, and he was readily given permission to perform, and commence his lay.

But this was no untutored bard, this Charan who said that he hailed from the north. His voice was as clear and sweet as a forest bird, and he was learned in the exploits of Rajput heroes.

He sang of Prithvi Raj and the peerless Padmini, of the heroic chieftains Alha and Udal, of Sangram Singh, lion of the forest and defier of Babar, the first Mogul. He sang of things dear to the Rajput heart, and stirred by his music, the Chandrawat warriors called for another lay.

Turning his face away from where the Chief, Durja Singh sat upon his cushion of state, the youth tuned the strings of his veena and for a time seemed as if were searching his memory for his song. Then accompanying himself softly, he began—

‘Whose is the stronghold that rises up yonder,
Turrets and pinnacles touching the sky?
Holds it the tyrant, the thief and the plunderer?
Holds it the coward, the traitor and the spy?
Yea ! for a while till the faithful returning
Comes from his exile a bolt from the blue,
The heart where the vengeance of years has been burn-
ing
Calls to his standard the brave men and true.’

The bard ceased, for a moment the company sat in silent astonishment, seeking for a meaning to this strange song.

Then Durja Singh, a look of cold fury on his face, rose from his place and called out, 'A spy ! a spy ! Seize the bard from the north, for a truth he comes from Delhi !'

There was an uproar, men sprang from their places, all joined in the hue and cry, but the bard had been too quick for them and had slipped away in the moment of silence that had followed his song.

All that night a search for the mysterious bard was continued even as far as the rugged paths that led to the abode of the Bhils, but no trace of him could be found. The guards swore that he had never passed them either going or coming, which pointed to the fact that he was no stranger to the fortress.

Durja Singh was a prey to uneasiness, for he had understood the song far better than any of his followers. Not for a moment did he think that the bard was a Mogul spy, though it suited him to set the rumour abroad amongst his people. As the night wore on and no word came of a capture, he grew too restless to sleep, and dismissing all the attendants from his chamber, sent for his minister.

He must tell someone of the fears that assailed him, and as the old man entered, deeply surprised at this midnight summons, the Chief bade him be seated and spoke hurriedly.

'They have not found the youth, it is as I feared, he is a spy and should never have been allowed to escape. We are too slow, it is always so; while we wait, our enemies prepare.'

'But my lord !' protested the old minister, 'whoever suspects a Charan? They come and go as they will.'

'That was no Charan,' returned Durja Singh contemptuously, 'nor was he a spy from Delhi.'

'But you said, my lord,'—began the minister.

'I said, I said !' retorted the exasperated Chief, 'was I to shout out all my fears in front of my men? That was no enemy of Mewar who sang of traitors and cowards.'

but a deadly enemy of mine, no other than the Rathor Tej Singh, of whom I have spoken to you before.'

The minister sat staring at his master in astonishment, 'Tej Singh, son of Tilak Singh?' he muttered uneasily; 'O Chief, how could he gain entrance to the fortress, if that is so?'

'How did he escape eight years ago?' said Durja Singh bitterly. 'There will be no peace for me while the Rathor lives, I tell you that my friend; and to think that to-day I was too weary, that my wits wandered and therefore I never seized him when he stood singing of my dishonour!'

The old minister evidently thought that Durja Singh had taken leave of his senses, for he sat looking at him with a half anxious, half sorrowful expression.

'You think I'm raving, old man!' said Durja Singh with a harsh laugh, 'that I have some maggot in my brain about this Rathor; you think still that he perished on the battlements when he fled from here. But he lives; such as he have nine lives, for at Haldighat he was ever in the thickest of the fray, he and his band of savages. He fought well, I saw it all with my own eyes, and I longed to throw my spear at his throat that day. But the memory of the Aheria came to me, and I resisted my impulse to slay him.'

'If you were then so merciful,' said the minister, 'why do you seek his life now, my lord?'

'I do not seek his life,' replied Durja Singh, 'not now, when to pursue a personal feud would be to endanger the cause of the Maharana. No, I do not wish to kill him yet, for every warrior is of great value, but when Mewar has no need of him or of me, then I will slake my vengeance in his blood, or die if I fail. That is why I must know always where to find him. I must watch lest he tries to raise a force against me. I must bribe and threaten my vassals, those who, weak fools that they are, mourn a Chief that is dead rather than serve faithfully one who is living and can mete out such treatment as they deserve. That dis-

loyal dog, old Gokuldas, is ever my enemy. The old fool got in my way, he and his mischief-making son. Well ! I accounted for the son, but the father—his white hairs protected him from the death he deserved; also the Maharana had need of men, and I desired a good following when I marched into Kumbhalmer. Rathor influence is too strong in my state, and this fire-brand youth, this mock minstrel, a danger to my peace of mind.'

The minister sighed heavily, 'I would my lord that you could rule with less violence,' he said courageously.

Durja Singh sprang up with a savage oath; 'What? you too ! then perhaps you enjoyed the ballad that the bard from the north sang before me and my company?'

'It was but the story of the fall of Chitor, if I understood the song aright,' replied the minister, 'and surely, my lord, we all long for the day of vengeance when we can drive the enemy out of Mewar, and see our dear prince return to what is his own.'

'Alas ! that your hair has whitened with so little wisdom,' sneered Durja Singh. 'The bard sang not of the fall of Chitor, or vengeance on the Mogul; he sang of the fall of Surja Malai and the traitor, the coward, and the spy, was I, your lord and master Durja Singh of the Chandrawats ! Now you know why I must bide my time and, when that time comes, kill Tej Singh the Rathor, so that I may retain the ancient stronghold of our clan.'

CHAPTER 15

THE SIEGE OF KUMBHALMER.

It was late in the autumn of the year in which the battle of Haldighati had been fought and lost. The violence of the monsoon had driven the Mogul's hordes from the storm swept slopes of the Aravalli and Prince Salim with his ally with their immense Delhi having retreated to their capital. The Rajas of Mewar were now in a position to make a stand.

watch for the tall figure of the Maharana, where, every sunset, he would stand upon the battlements and gaze out towards the plains of Mewar, until his trained eye caught the first speck upon the horizon that told him his foes were drawing near. Calling his kinsman, the old Sonigra Chief, he pointed out the advance of the Mogul force, which under its ambitious commanders marched confidently in the direction of the new Sesodia stronghold. By this time the Moguls had realised that numbers were of the greatest importance in their attacks upon the Rajputs, and the force that approached under Shabaz Khan was large enough to abash even the intrepid Pratap Singh.

'See, there they come,' he said with a sigh, for his heart was weary of unequal battle, and the future looked dark indeed.

'And here we wait for them,' replied the sturdy old Chieftain; 'methinks, nephew, that the pampered Mogul will be out of breath long before he reaches our eyrie.'

'Bold words, my uncle,' said Pratap, 'but it is not of the men I am thinking, it is of their guns. In the days when warriors fought hand to hand with lance and trusty sword, I would have watched the approach of that great force with a smile, knowing that had it been twice as large, our chance of holding this fortress would be a fair one; but now our ancient defences are but traps, and personal valour quails before a shot fired by an unseen hand.'

'Come, Patta,' rallied the old Chief, 'are there no heroes left in Rajasthan?' and then he added in a reverent tone, 'Are there no Gods to call on? Put away these doubts; the spirits of our great ancestors will fight beside us, and, hark you! nephew, if it seems as if the fortress must fall, then you must fly, because the future of Mewar rests with you, and I will remain to welcome the Turk.'

Embracing the old patriot, Pratap Singh took courage from his brave and simple words, and when the

victory, and as the great gates fell before the powerful onslaught of the Mogul attack, and the enemy swept all before them, the sight of the two old patriots fighting shoulder to shoulder was ever remembered both by the Turk and Rajput who saw them that day. With the great battle cry of the Rajputs, *Ekalingji ki jai!* on their lips, together they fell. But the song of the bard did not perish with him, for wherever the deeds of Rajput heroism are told or sung, the story of the Chief of Mewar and of his clan will be heard.

To Pratap Singh they brought the news of the fall of Kumbhalmer, and at the same time the tidings that Raja Man Singh was marching on the little stronghold of Chawand.

Once more he became a fugitive, fleeing into the very heart of the Aravalis, pursued by the ruthless foe. Like bloodhounds they followed on his trail, though every inch of their progress was disputed by the loyal Rajputs, who covered the retreat of the Prince with their lives.

'Yield!' flashed the message from the powerful Akbar.

'Never, so long as my arm can wield a sword,' hurled back the last hope of the Sesodias.

The Moguls had let him slip through their fingers once more, and while they paused, angry and perplexed, the fury of the monsoon burst upon their weary armies, and a great wall of mist concealed the hiding place of their quarry.

Nature, seeing that all human help was denied to the noblest of her children, had come to his aid and saved him for Mewar.

CHAPTER 16

THE ROYAL FUGITIVES

On a wild and stormy night, a covered palanquin, borne by four trusty Bhils, left Surya Mahal and was carried swiftly away in the direction of the forest. The bearers travelled with the utmost caution, scarcely a sound was made.

as they sped over the rough ground and turned into the lonely track that led to the abode of their Chieftain.

It was almost dawn when they reached their destination, and setting down their burden beside the door of a cave, disappeared into the darkness of the surrounding jungle.

From inside the palanquin a closely veiled figure of a woman descended, and knocking timidly at the rude door of the cave, entered. The cave was almost dark; a wick steeped in oil burned dimly in one corner, throwing weird shadows on the rocky walls. As soon as her eyes had grown accustomed to the gloom, Pushpkumari (for it was she) saw that she was not alone; upon a couch reclined a beautiful lady, her robe of rich silk, the diamond star that sparkled on her forehead, and the necklace of pearls she wore, all proclaiming her to be someone of exalted rank.

With a deep obeisance, Pushpkumari stood in front of the Queen, wife of the Maharana Pratap Singh, whose only refuge now was this rough cave, for sharing her husband's exile and honouring his vow which bound him to simplicity so long as Mewar rested in chains, she would accept nothing more from all the loyal Chiefs than this poor refuge.

'Ah, Pushpkumari! so you have come safely,' exclaimed the queen in a rich musical voice; 'it will be pleasant to have your company, dear child, in this anxious time. But how fare matters at Surya Mahal? They tell me that the fortress is already besieged, and I was anxious for your safety, tell me then how you managed to pass out in safety.'

The tears sprang to Pushpkumari's eyes as she saw the deep change that had been wrought in the royal lady's face by all her sufferings. Her cheeks were pale and wan, her beautiful eyes sunken and her mouth, once smiling and tender, now drooped pathetically. The girl could feel for her royal mistress from the depths of her heart and said tenderly:

'Dear and noble Rani, no greater boon could you grant me than to let me stay with you. I escaped from the

beleaguered fortress by an underground passage that leads almost to the edge of the forest. I do not know who thought of me. Durja Singh had talked of placing me under your care, but at the last nothing was done and I waited in the deepest anxiety for some chance to escape. Last night when I (too anxious to sleep) paced up and down my chamber, one of my women brought a message to say that I must fly by way of the underground passage and that I should be met by loyal bearers who would carry me to you. The men were Bhils, so perchance Devi Singh, the Bhoomia Chief had arranged my rescue, for who else would send the forest men to bear me in safety to this mountain retreat?

The Queen listened with grave attention, and then she said again, 'But how fare matters at Surya Mahal?' and added in a voice that trembled, 'and my lord, the Maharana, heard you ought of him?'

'The Maharana was of good cheer, so they said,' replied the maiden, 'and he had decided to defend the fortress in person.'

'It is ever thus,' lamented the Queen, 'where there is the greatest danger there is my lord,' and then she threw up her handsome head and continued, 'But craven that I am, poor foolish heart, where is my Rajput blood, that I speak like a frightened child. But oh, Pushpkumari! it has been so long and I am sick from hope deferred. How will it all end? Would that I were with my lord to cheer and uphold him. But he willed it otherwise for the sake of our children.'

And the royal fugitive rose from her couch, and paced restlessly up and down among the dark shadows of the cave. A gentle tap at the door recalled her to herself. 'Enter!' she commanded, and re-seated herself on the couch, as the old Charani of the Tiger's Mount appeared and prostrated herself before the royal lady.

'Great Queen!' she said in a deep solemn voice, 'be of good courage, for I see glorious days in store for Rajasthan and for the noble Maharana!'

'I am grateful to you, O Charani,' replied the Queen, 'we were but now talking of my lord. He defends Surya Mahal, and it is long since I have seen him, but I know that he is in danger. For many weary days we have been fugitives before the enemy, flying from fortress to fortress, forest to hill-top, living more poorly than the Bhils among whom I have now been forced to take refuge. Is this the life for the first among Mewar's royal families? Hark! even now I can hear the battle raging beyond the hill-tops,' and once more the Queen arose, and pressing her fingers over her ears, walked about the cave in uncontrollable agitation.

'Gently, my Queen,' said the Charani, 'all is well with the Maharana.'

'Bless you for those comforting words,' exclaimed the Queen.

'Yes, all is well with him,' repeated the old prophetess; 'fear not for him, for so long as the blood of the Sesodias runs in the veins of a Rajput, he shall not lack a following. The history of Mewar shall still be writ in words of gold. All is not lost, and you have here a safe refuge with those who have ever supported their Prince in the defence of Rajasthan.'

'Well do I know the loyalty of Devi Singh, the Bhoomia lord and of Bhim Chand, Chief of the Bhils,' replied the Queen, 'but alas, our very presence here endangers Bhimgarh and the little fort of the Bhils. Hidden away in the jungle as they are, the keen eye of the Turk will discern them, and endeavour to reduce these trusty vassals as he has the strongholds of the more powerful Chiefs. So long as there is one turret from which the scarlet banner floats, Akbar will not fail to hunt out the faithful chief who may perhaps harbour the Maharana. If Bhimgarh falls, where can I fly? We shall be caught like rats in a trap. I do not fear death—what true Rajput woman does?—but my children, my little helpless children, who will care for them if I perish?

During the next few days of anxiety and suspense the Charani was often with the royal lady, cheering her and comforting her with words of serene wisdom, for although the battle raged round Surya Mahal, though the fate of

Bhimgarh was held in the balance, the prophetess held to her vision of better days for Mewar.

Her steady faith was of the greatest help to the Queen in her ordeal of waiting for news of the Maharana's fate, and the gentle presence of Pushpkumari soothed the war-worn woman until peace once more descended upon her spirit, and she busied herself in the care of her children, who, heedless of the peril which daily menaced them, played happily under the sal trees outside the door of the cave.

And so the days went by, anxious but not too unhappy, for the two women and the old Charani were never weary of extolling the valour of the Rajput warriors. News from the beleaguered fortress was scanty. Sometimes a messenger would come into Bhimgarh, but it was ever the same tale of stubborn resistance on the part of the besieged, ruthless determination on that of the besiegers.

In the meantime the gallant defenders of Surya Mahal were suffering every privation. Food and water were growing scarce, and the presence of the Maharana added much to the anxiety of the garrison, for if he fell or was captured, the cause of Mewar would be lost indeed.

The ruthless Durja Singh played a splendid part in the defence, and many a Mogul fell before the brilliant and unexpected sallies of the Chief, who with a handful of picked men would issue forth through the great gates, and create terrible slaughter among the Moguls who had gained the upper positions. Then, as quickly as he had appeared, he would withdraw, the gates would be shut, and shouts of triumph fill the air from the delighted defenders, who had watched his exploits from above.

But in spite of the endurance and valour of the besieged Rajputs, they realized that it was only a question of time before the Moguls took Surya Mahal.

Then Durja Singh went to the Maharana, and urged him with all respect to escape by the underground passage that led from the fortress to a place of safety. For a time

Pratap Singh resolutely refused to desert his post, but realising at last that his death would mean the end of his father's freedom, he was at last persuaded to leave. His flight was so swift and silent that even trusted men of the garrison were sure that he was not still in the fortress, and he slipped away under his covering eye.

Durja Singh, left alone with a mere handful of trusty followers, looked down upon the town. They seemed more numerous than ever. Indeed the attempt had so nearly succeeded that the soldiers of the garrison were badly cut up, and the fortments were much damaged.

Now a Singh had resolved to die, he realised that Pratap Singh would need every sword, every arrow and every bow in the future. It was better to live and fight again, but now there seemed little chance of escape. A crash! the gates were down, the Moguls swept like a torrent into Suraj Mahal. Well! he had his sword. They should buy his life dear. Just as he was to take the blow, he saw Tej Singh the Rathor standing beside him. His face was streaming with blood from a wound at last he was quite undaunted.

'The gates are down,' he said; 'come, Chief, there is no time to lose, your life will pay the cost of delay.'

For a moment Durja Singh was too astounded to reply, then he muttered, 'Escape! and how can I escape. I have no wings, and the way to the secret passage will now be cut off,' and then he added, 'But how come you here, Rathor?'

'No matter how,' replied Tej Singh; 'come save yourself, it is for the Maharana's sake. He will have need of you. There is yet a way;' and he pointed to a window which looked down upon a deep ravine. 'Once long ago a boy escaped that way,' he said, 'and if a boy could, why not a man?'

Durja Singh's proud face twitched, he was ashamed. Below, the shouts of the assailants made the air resound.

'O come!' urged Tej Singh, 'the past can take care of

itself; we must look to the future, the future of Mewar;' and with a succession of strong blows with his mace, he shattered the bars of the window.

In a moment the two men were through, and scrambling down towards safety. After what seemed an age they reached the foot of the fortress and crossing the moat, struck out under cover of the falling darkness towards the mountain retreat where they knew the Maharana was now in hiding.

CHAPTER 17

THE FALL OF BHINGARH

An ominous quiet reigned in Rajasthan after the fall of Surya Mahal. Durja Singh had joined the Maharana, who, with a handful of followers remaining to him, was driven from place to place.

There were occasional skirmishes between the two parties but no attack on a large scale had been attempted by the Moguls, and it was possible for Pratap Singh occasionally to snatch a few hours with his devoted and beloved family.

His Maharani was still dwelling in the cave, near the fortress of Bhingarh, and the faithful Pushpkumari ministered unceasingly to her comfort. For this the Maharana was deeply grateful, as the bitterest drop in his already bitter cup, was to see his Queen reduced to poverty, her delicate hands worn with work, her regal form bent with fatigue. But she resisted every effort made by him to place her in more suitable surroundings, weeping so pitifully if he ever suggested that she should leave the place where he might sometimes come, that at last he desisted and blessed her for her fidelity.

Another gleam of brightness in this dark hour was the constant devotion of the Rathor, Tej Singh, who, though he never came in person to the cave, yet showed by many delicate attentions his respect for the misfortunes of the royal fugitives. The Maharana had indeed cause to be

grateful to Tej Singh at this time, for the young Rathor was ever on the watch, he seemed to know everything and be prepared for everything.

The distinction with which his rival was treated by Pratap Singh, filled Durja Singh with bitter jealousy; for in spite of the service the Rathor had rendered him during the fall of Surya Mahal, he hated him more than ever.

One summer evening the sentinels who were posted upon the battlements of Bhingarh saw a long black line advancing, like a train of ants along the trunk of a fallen tree. With a shout of dismay and warning to the guards, they rushed away to find the son of Devi Singh, the youth Chandan, for the Chief himself was away with the Maharana and six hundred of his retinue, and but five hundred remained all told to defend the fort.

'The Turks are upon us,' shouted the men, and Chandan hurried to the edge of the battlements, and saw that what the sentinels said was only too true. In a few short hours the fortress would surely be attacked, and by a strong force too if his eyes told him true. For a moment he wondered what he could do. The Queen and her children were under the protection of Devi Singh; though not actually within the fort. Still they would be in great peril, and the Maharana had entrusted them to the defenders of Bhingarh.

He thought of the time when a few short months ago he had flourished his sword and boasted that no Mogul should enter Bhingarh. If he could prevent it, they should not, and with a sharp command of, 'Close the gates and prepare every man for the defence of Bhingarh', he ran down the steps which led to the main entrance to see that all was made as safe as possible.

At the foot of the stairway he met Tej Singh, and gave a great shout of joy, not unmingled with relief.

'I thought you were miles away with the Maharana and my father,' said the boy.

'And so I was,' replied Tej Singh.

I heard news which made me think you would be pleased to see me, Chandan, and so without a word to the Maharana, who has other work on hand I rode hard to warn you of the approaching attack.'

'Indeed I'm glad you've come, Tej,' said Chandan, 'for I am afraid for the safety of the Queen. You know she dwells in a cave near by, and I fear that if the fortress fell her hiding place might be discovered by the Turk.'

'I had thought of that,' replied Tej Singh, gravely, 'and now my brave fellow, can you hold the fortress with your five hundred? For I must conduct the children to a place of safety, or else they may be made captives.'

Chandan turned away for a moment. He could see that the Moguls were advancing rapidly; the attack was but a question of hours, and, young as he was, he realized that to hold the fortress against such heavy odds was well nigh impossible. Then, drawing his sword from its scabbard, he ran his hand along its fine edge.

'Go you with the Queen, Tej Singh,' he said gaily, 'and I will run through as many Turks as I can meanwhile. Take with you a sufficient guard, leave me the rest, and I'll warrant you each man shall account for a dozen apiece of yonder fellows!'

'Well spoken! Chandan,' said the Rathor; 'good fortune attend you, O brave son of a brave father. May be we shall meet again, but remember that to die faithful to one's trust, is the greatest of all deaths.'

'Tej Singh,' said Chandan earnestly, 'I have waited for this day, and you shall see that I can be worthy of my father.'

Seeking out the Maharani, Tej Singh warned her of the approaching danger, and prevailed upon her to accompany him by a secret passage which led from Bhingarh to the disused mines of Jawara.

'There you will be safe, O Rani,' he said gently, 'and I will return and warn the Maharana of the fate of Bhingarh.'

'Brave and generous youth,' replied the Maharani, the tears running down her sad face, 'it is to such as you that my lord will owe the freedom of Mewar, should he at length accomplish it. I am loth to leave Bhingarh to its fate, but my presence here is an added danger to that brave boy and his mother. I will go with you wherever you may lead, and may the blessings of the Gods fall upon you!'


In a short time the little party, escorted by a few picked men from the garrison, made their escape by devious routes from the cave which had for so many weeks been the refuge of the Queen. With her royal mistress went Pushpkumari, her beautiful face closely veiled, and her eyes turned away from where Tej Singh, proud, handsome and seemingly indifferent, led the party.

'He has forgotten me,' thought the maiden, 'well, I too can forget;' but alas, she could not, and a tear stole down her face under her veil, though she held her head high.

In the meantime preparations for the defence of Bhingarh were hastily carried out. Torches flared, and along the ramparts the scanty garrison were posted to the best advantage; above them to direct their operations, stood the youthful Chandan, last hope of his race.

Like a wave the Mogul forces dashed themselves against the fortifications, and seeing the pitifully small number who awaited them, decided to storm the gates. The defenders saw their purpose and each man prepared to sell his life dear. On came the Moguls, and as they scaled the heights, three hundred Rajput swords flashed forth, and there followed the grimmest contest those grey walls had ever witnessed. All day the fight raged, and the ground was piled with dead and dying. As the sun sank blood-red behind the hills, but half of the brave defenders remained.

The Moguls withdrew; they had lost heavily, but could afford to wait until the morrow; the taking of the fortress was but a question of time.



At midnight, when the ghastly scene was lit up by the faint beams of a waning moon, Tej Singh returned to the inner fort, and took up his position there with fifty of his men.

The boy Chandan, who had stood at his post without flinching, now sought his mother, who surrounded by her terrified women, sat serene and still, speaking words of comfort and consolation to all around her.

As her young son entered, she gave him a beautiful smile of proud affection. Bowing low before her, he knelt at her feet, and the token of respect brought tears to her eyes. Raising him up, she bade him tell her how the battle fared.

'I have good news for you, dear mother', replied the boy; 'the fort is still in our hands, but three hundred of our men have given up their lives. Outside a thousand of the enemy wait to renew the attack at sunrise.'

'It is well!' said his mother, 'and our two hundred men will give battle to the thousand on the morrow.'

'If it were not that we fear for the fate of the women and children nothing would please us more,' replied her son staunchly.

'Dear child,' said his mother, 'go about your business, defend the fortress to the last, and leave us to do our part. We understand the duty of Rajput women very well, my Chandan;' and with another last look of abiding love, the brave women led her son from the chamber and returned to her companions.

'Dear friends,' she said quietly, 'this is our day indeed. Let us show the Turk how Rajput women value their honour.'

Then a great peace descended upon the frightened company of women. Cheerfully they made ready for the morrow, clothing themselves in pure white garments, as if for a holy festival, and as the sun came up they gathered together inside the great court. Old women were there, pale and withered as the bark of the sal tree, and maidens fresh as

morning dew. All were met there for one great purpose, to do honour to the men who had given up their lives or who were preparing to die when the gates fell.

The great pyres were lighted, the flames leapt into the air, and with songs upon their lips and cries of gladness those women of a deathless race sprang into the fire. Higher the livid flames rose, taking with them all that was beautiful, good and true, for when defeat, dishonour and loss of faith threaten them the Rajput women know that to die is best.

And from the battlements of the doomed fortress the remnants of the defenders watched the pyres burn. Not a sound escaped their lips, not a muscle moved in their stern faces.

All was over; the great end had come. Clad in saffron robes, they too bowed before the temple gates and said their last prayers. Then, embracing each other and chanting their great battle cry, they opened the gates and descended upon the foe. Awakened from the sleep by the shouts of their sentinels, the Moguls saw what looked like two hundred young gods marching towards them. Hastily they armed and swarmed to meet the attack.

And so they fell, those brave defenders of Bhingarh, fell, but not before they had accounted for five hundred of the foe, and with his young face turned towards the sun died the heroic Chandan, faithful to the sword of his ancestors, and to his vow.

On a distant hill stood the Maharana and his company, and as they looked out across the valley, a thin wisp of smoke, followed by tongues of flame mounted towards the faint blue of the morning sky.

By the Prince stood Devi Singh, his face set in a mask of bronze.

'It is Bhingarh,' groaned Pratap Singh.

'The women are keeping a festival,' replied the old Chief quietly, and as he spoke he reeled and fell at the feet of his Prince.

CHAPTER 18.

THE DARKEST HOUR

Grieved to the very soul by the fall of Bhingarh and the death of Devi Singh's brave young son Chandan, the Maharana returned to the cave and the sympathy of his wife.

Seeing that the royal pair wished to be alone, Pushpkumari called the children to her, from where they clustered wide-eyed round their mother, and saying that she would tell them a story of Rajput chivalry and adventure, she led them away to a spot under the sal trees.

With an air of deep dejection, Pratap Singh watched his Queen as she moved quietly about her preparations for the simple meal. Though her beautiful face was lined with fatigue and sorrow, though there seemed no hope left and nowhere left for them to fly, she uttered no word of complaint, but rather did her best to raise the drooping spirit of her lord.

With many a deep sigh he told her of the great sacrifice of Bhingarh, of the dwindling number of his men and of the constant sacrifices they were forced to make so long as they fought under his banner.

Never before had he realized with such painful clearness at what great cost these loyal vassals served him. They were called upon to give up all that made life dear, and reap little or no reward save a knowledge that they stood faithful to a forlorn cause. Bereaved, impoverished, they had never reproached their leader, but had he the right to exact still further toll from the few brave lives left of that noble company who had rallied round him at Haldighat? How much longer could the unequal struggle continue? The Moguls now held every stronghold of importance in Mewar. Akbar was prepared to carry on hostilities as long as an inch of ground remained to the patriots. He was powerful, rich, and ready to pay in men and gold for the final subjugation of the Sesodias. By a word, he, Pratap Singh, could gain

a cessation of these miseries for those who had so nobly served him.

As he glanced at the Queen, who upon her knees was trying to coax into flame the fire of damp sticks, the thought of her privations increased his despair. To what had he brought her, this high born woman ! Well, he would say the word ; Akbar should realize his dearest ambition and receive the homage of the Prince of Mewar.

Leaving the cave, he went out into the twilight ; a faint star hung over the plains, but it was not for him. Turning in the direction of Chitor, his heart withered by misery, the great patriot said brokenly,

‘Not for myself, but for those who have given all and gained nothing, I relinquish thee, O my beloved Mewar !’

Next day a messenger set out to the court of Delhi, bearing a letter, in which an armistice was demanded on the condition of the Maharana Pratap Singh’s submission to the Emperor Akbar.

CHAPTER 19

THE MESSAGE FROM DELHI

From the time that he had despatched the note of submission to Delhi, Pratap Singh seemed to lose heart. Bereft of hope for his country, for whose redemption he had toiled unceasingly, there seemed little left for him to live for.

He was still faced with the ordeal of breaking to his loyal vassals the news that he could no longer lead them, that in future they would all be subject to the Emperor Akbar, who now might rightly style himself ruler of Hindustan.

For the purpose of acquainting them with the changed fortunes of Mewar, he invited all those that were left, to a council at Chawand, which after the fall of Bhingarh he had made his headquarters. As usual they greeted him with cries of ‘Victory ! Victory to the Maharana Pratap Singh !’ as usual they raised their lances and swore their fid

but the Prince had no smile for them that day, and though he bowed graciously in answer to their loyal salutations they saw, every man of them, that a grave crisis had arrived in their fortunes.

Silently they grouped themselves round the gadi; no noisy clash of arms, no sign of eager expectation, eased the tense silence of the company.

Then Pratap Singh arose. 'Brethren,' he said sadly, 'the end has come, not as I hoped, not as I had led you all to hope, in freedom of Mewar, but in bondage to the Mogul. We have played high and we have lost. Fate is too strong for us and the Gods are asleep or indifferent. Akbar will offer you rich rewards in exchange for your independence. You shall see your children's children grow up in peace and plenty, and the blackened fields of Mewar spring again to life. The granaries and the treasuries shall be full to overflowing, for the Mogul Emperor can be generous to those whom he has conquered. Though your swords rust in their scabbards, and where the crimson banner flew, the crescent of the Mogul flaunts our humiliation, no shame can touch you, my Chieftains, for you have fought long and faithfully. Accept your honourable discharge, and all that I have left to bestow upon you —my thanks and blessing.'

A low murmur of dismay broke the uneasy silence with which the assembled chiefs had listened to Pratap Singh's tragic speech, and on every face could be seen expressions of consternation and discontent. Not one man there, but had given of his best to Mewar, only to learn that his sacrifices had been in vain. Weary they were, poor and persecuted, but they were free, and not until that moment had they realized how precious their freedom was.

They had only their lives to offer and lives were not enough. To continue the resistance against Akbar required money, and five times the men they could muster. But they were heart-broken with their beloved Prince, and could see no way to help him.

The Parmar of Bizli arose and said simply, 'Maharana, your word is law. If you tell us to go to Delhi, we will go, if you tell us to bury these swords in our faithful hearts, before we acknowledge an alien master, that we do gladly. I speak for us all. Is not that so, my brother Chiefs?'

And with one accord the company answered, 'As the Maharana bids us, so will we do. He is our life, our head, our all.'

At that moment, when feeling was at its deepest, and the Maharana sat silent under his strong emotion, struggling for composure and for words in which to answer his devoted vassals, a messenger from Delhi was announced.

A dark shadow passed over the brow of Pratap Singh—this perhaps was the answer from the Emperor, this was indeed the end. He commanded that the courier should be immediately admitted, and as the man made known his errand, there was a long breath of relief from all the company, for the message was not from Akbar, but from Prithvi Raj, the brother of the Maharaja of Bikanir, a vassal of the Imperial throne.

Though Prithvi Raj now dwelled at Delhi, he had watched with passionate sympathy the noble struggle of Pratap Singh to uphold the independence of Mewar, and if success attended the Rajput arms, he would make no secret of his joy even in front of the Amirs and Princes at the Durbar.

He was present when the Emperor announced the submission of Pratap Singh, and amid the general congratulations of the ministers and courtiers, he alone withheld his compliments. The news struck him like a blow over the heart, for in his exile in Delhi, his only consolation was the thought that at least one Prince of Rajasthan upheld the splendid traditions of the Rajputs.

And now Pratap Singh had yielded to Akbar! so they said, and there sat the Emperor, his face wreathed in complacent smiles, for of all the triumphs he had won, this was the best and dearest. Long had he held

of friendship to the haughty Sesodia Prince, only to be rebuffed by a fresh outburst of defiance from the unconquerable Rajput.

'For this I would have bartered half my kingdom,' he cried, waving the very missive in which Pratap had signed away the freedom of Mewar.

'Let the people make holiday,' he added joyfully, 'let them dance and sing in the streets, for Pratap Singh of Mewar comes to Delhi.'

Then Prithvi Raj rose, his heart almost bursting from grief and indignation. 'Sire!' he protested, 'there is some grave mistake. Long have I known Pratap Singh of Mewar; the letter is a forgery. The Sesodia will never come alive to Delhi!'

'How say you so, when under his hand and seal he promises me submission in exchange for an amnesty,' cried Akbar, much incensed at the suggestion that his triumph was an empty one.

'Your Majesty has enemies nearer than Mewar,' said Prithvi Raj meaningly; 'permit me, Sire, to send my own courier to the Maharana of Mewar for confirmation of the despatch which has reached the court of Delhi.'

The Emperor, ever ready to entertain counsels of wisdom and reason, and indulgent to his Hindu vassals, readily agreed to Prithvi Raj's request, for if in truth the letter was a forgery and he acted upon it Pratap Singh might gain considerably from the respite.

Next day, the special courier of Prithvi Raj left Delhi, and after making all possible speed reached the fortress of Chavand bearing a letter from his master to the Maharana.

With feverish haste, Pratap Singh undid the silken tassel, and broke the seal of the fateful letter. But what was this? No Imperial mandate but a set of verses written in his own familiar language. With trembling hands he spread out the paper and read its contents.

'The hopes of the Hindu rest on the Hindu; yet the Rana forsakes them. But for Pratap, all would be placed on the same level by Akbar.

While the Emperor bargains in our honour and self-respect, Pratap alone has withstood the bribes and been absent from the mart of the Mogul. Glory be to him !

The world asks, whence the concealed aid of Pratap? None but the soul of manliness and his sword. To him all look for preservation, and hope that the glory of Mewar shall again become resplendent.'

Once, twice and yet again Pratap Singh read the letter. The simple words conveyed to him such a message of hope and invincible faith, that new blood seemed to course through his veins, and rising to his feet, his face transformed by a great joy, he cried out: 'To the winds with a truce ! The road to Delhi sees us not. Either we will win back Mewar or forget Mewar, but never, never will we bow before the throne of the Mogul !'

With shouts of joy the company of warriors acclaimed his decision, and so the council at Chawand ended, and once more the Chiefs of Mewar went forth with the sword.

CHAPTER 20

THE TIDE TURNS

But the fresh resolution of patriotism was easier to form than to carry out. The Maharana, in spite of his courage, was unable to maintain the unequal campaign, for he was now sorely hampered by lack of funds with which to support even the tiny army that remained to him. Men and horses had to be fed, and although he himself lived with a simplicity that was unequalled by the Bhils, yet he had responsibilities that proved too heavy for his poor resources.

Never again would there be any question of submitting to Akbar. What other course lay open him? He had said, 'Either we shall win back Mewar or forget Mewar.' They

could not redeem Chitor, and so they must find a new habitation, far away from that beloved rock of their race, where, free from oppression of the tyrant, they could build their temples and win back the favour of the Great Mother.

One day a procession of men, women and children, crossed the Aravalis, and left behind them the dear land which through the ages had been the home of their ancestors. The men were fully armed, and with them went one to whom they looked as the saviour of their race. He rode alone, silent and withdrawn from all but his own sad thoughts.

From the litters, women gazed with tear-dimmed eyes, at their deserted homes, pointing out to their children the fast fading line of the familiar hills, and as the sun set, and darkness blotted out the lonely fortresses so long and bravely defended, strong men wept and stumbled on the road to exile.

At the foot of the last range of hills which divided the uplands from the plains they struck camp, and here they were met by the old minister who for forty years had served the Raj with unfailing honesty. His had been no easy task—to collect the funds with which to feed and equip the forces of Mewar. Through the length and breadth of Rajasthan he had travelled, collecting dues, raising levies, and never failing in his trust. He had been absent from the Council, and had only learned indirectly of Pratap Singh's decision to relinquish Mewar for ever.

Astonished and dismayed, he had hurried back to Chawand to intercept the Prince, for he had been far away when the news reached him. But the pilgrims had already set out, and the minister found the fortress forlorn and deserted. Without waiting for rest or food, the faithful old man set out in pursuit, and arrived at the camp travel-stained and dusty, just as Pratap Singh was taking one last look back upon the land that he had forsaken.

'Ah!' cried the unhappy Prince, 'is beautiful Mewar lost to us for ever?'

'Mewar shall still remain to the Sesodia,' replied a voice from the gloom.

'Who speaks?' demanded Pratap Singh sharply, and a bent figure emerged, and with a deep obeisance, stood before him. Pratap Singh at once recognized his old servant, whom he had thought to be a hundred miles away.

'How came you here?' he demanded in surprise, 'and what do your bold words mean?'

'It is as I say, my Prince,' replied the minister; 'Mewar shall still be yours.'

'You talk wildly good Bhamsha,' said the Prince gently, 'for you know well that without revenues, without men and without hope I cannot redeem Chitor.'

'And if I told the Maharana that there was gold and to spare to keep your armies for a dozen years, then would hope revive?' asked the minister eagerly.

'If you told me such a tale, I should but think that sorrow had set your wits a-wandering,' replied the Prince with a wild laugh; 'where is such a hoard to be found in Rajasthan? Have you yourself not squeezed for me the last cowrie from my suffering people? Nay, go your way, good Bhamsha, and let me take mine, for it is best so.'

'My wits are not wandering, O Prince,' said the minister, 'and what I offer is from no levy forced upon those ill fitted to pay, but my own private fortune, saved by years of toil and simple living. For forty years I have lived for this day, lived to offer my all to the Prince to whom I owe my all. Accept this poor gift from one who if too old to fight, can yet help you to regain the throne of the Sesodias.'

For a moment the Maharana stood uncertain whether he had heard aright, but there stood the old minister, the light of calm reason in his eyes, and upon his withered face a look of almost holy joy. Then tenderly embracing his deliverer, the Prince said, 'No patriot deserves better at the hand of his country than you, good faithful servant.'

As long as the name of the Sesodias is associated with Mewar, so shall the memory of your service be said and sung.'

When the Rajputs assembled in the camp learned that they were to return to their homes and once again bear arms for Mewar, scenes of the greatest enthusiasm took place. Lances and swords were brought into play in mock warfare; the bard, whose song had been silent in the hours of the march, now tuned his veena, and began a martial lay. Fires were lighted, and the women, who had been so faithfully prepared to follow their men to exile, caught up their children and held them out towards the dark line of mountains, as if offering them to their native land.

The Prince was already busy with plans to re-take his lost strongholds. They could afford to laugh at Delhi now, for with ample funds unlimited resistance became possible. The Chiefs, exuberant, claimed the privilege, each one of regaining his own lost fortress, and a plan to provoke the Moguls to open battle was not thought impossible.

The men of Mewar had revived like thirsty flowers after rain, and the return journey across the Aravali was accomplished in a very different mood to that which had marked their first day's march to exile.

On the great plain of Dewar lay the Mogul army. In command was the famous Shahabaz Khan. Like a rushing tempest the Rajput forces came upon them, the whole weight of their indomitable valour concentrated in one great bid for victory. Shahabaz Khan fell, and on came the men of Mewar; one fortress after another fell to them, Kumbhalmer, Udaipur, and before the year was up they were the masters of thirty-two of their former strongholds.

In a frenzy of patriotic joy, the victorious Pratap Singh carried all before him, and to crown his triumph, boldly annexed the territory of his sworn enemy, the Raja Man Singh of Amber.

Swiftly the news went to Delhi that once more the crim-

son banner of the Sesodias waved proudly over Mewar, and Akbar, hearing the story of the Rajput conquests, cried out in anger and regret, 'Had but Pratap Singh come to me, together we would have conquered the world.'

But in imagination the Prince of the Sesodias was upon his knees in front of the altar of his brave kinsman Sahidas, where it stood upon the blood-stained rock of Chitor.

'I live but to bring back to thee what is thine,' he said brokenly; never should his sword rest until he might lay it upon that sacred slab.

Among the few strongholds still in the hands of the Mogul, was Surya Mahal, and here before its frowning face, met the Rathor and Chandrawat Chiefs, Tej Singh and Durja Singh, each with a strong retinue. Bitter enemies though they were, the cause of Mewar came first and they fought shoulder to shoulder in the siege.

It was a matter of honour who should first enter.

The fight was a grim one, the Moguls defended valiantly, and as Durja Singh cut his way through a phalanx of the enemy, he saw Tej Singh above him, pressing on towards the great gates.

The sight filled him with rage, and nerved his arm to still greater prodigies of strength. Man after man went down before his terrible sword. He was wounded himself, but scarcely noticed the blood that poured down his face. Still ahead of him, Tej Singh had reached the gates. A fierce struggle, a shout of triumph, and they fell. Tej Singh had gained the fortress, but behind him, men of the Chandrawat claimed the right of entry.

Sullen with rage, Durja Singh re-entered Surya Mahal. Over the piles of dead and dying he met the frank eyes of the young Rathor, and his own were full of anger.

'Rathor,' he said, 'you were before me and the fortress is yours. But remember that I shall not rest until I have regained it.'

Tej Singh smiled sadly, 'I do not claim what is not yet

mine,' he said, 'for the Ranaji I entered Surya Mahal. When peace reigns in Mewar, I will crave permission of the Prince to settle my own affairs,' and with a proud and graceful salutation, the chivalrous Rathor made way for Durja Singh to take the higher place.

When the shadows of night fell, Tej Singh left the home of his fathers, and once more took the lonely path towards the forest.

CHAPTER 21

TEJ SINGH COMES HOME

There was rejoicing in Mewar, for at last the Mogul troops had withdrawn to Delhi, and each Chief was able to collect his diminished retinue and return to his stronghold. The Maharana had thanked them in all glowing terms of gratitude for their great services to their country. Swords rested in their scabbards, and once more the hunting horn was heard where the marching drum had been the only sound, and every warrior made holiday.

But among those who had taken part in the great struggle were three, to whom the armistice brought no relief—Devi Singh, the old Bhoomia Chieftain, who had lost all he loved in the world when his fortress fell, and to whom the blackened walls of the inner court brought memories so tragic that he wished he had died with his beloved son. Another was old Gokuldas. The third was Tej Singh the young Rathor, who in devotion to his Prince had sunk his private quarrels, and now when that devotion was no longer needed, felt his lonely situation with increased bitterness.

When he saw the victorious Chiefs riding towards their strongholds, lances held aloft, pennons waving, assured of a splendid welcome home, his heart was sore and angry. The thought that the banner of the Chandrawats flew unchallenged over Surya Mahal was like poison to him, but worse still was the fear that Durja Singh had supplanted him in the fickle affections of Pushpkumari.

'If she cannot be mine she shall never be his,' thought the Rathor wildly, and he formed the plan of collecting as large a force as he could with which to attack Surya Mahal.

With this idea in his mind, he sought out old Gokuldas and confided to him the plan.

'I have waited for this,' said Gokuldas simply, 'my resources and my sword are yours, O son of the good and great Tilak Singh.'

'Bhim Chand and his bowmen will be with us' said Tilak Singh hopefully, 'the Bhils have no love for the Chandrawat.'

'And Devi Singh, the Bhoomia Chieftain,' said Gokuldas thoughtfully, 'he has twice the men that I have, but not the deadly hatred of Durja Singh that burns here,' and the old man laid his hand upon his breast, as if he were in pain.

'It is well,' said Tej Singh, 'but not a word, Gokuldas, we must move quietly, or the Chandrawat rogue will be too ready for us.'

In a few days all was in readiness, and Tej Singh accompanied by Devi Singh and Gokuldas, each with their body of men, and a goodly company of picked bowmen under Bhim Chand, set off for Surya Mahal.

Night was falling as they reached the fortress, and so stealthily had been their approach that the sound of Tej Singh's bugle was the first warning of the attack. For a moment consternation reigned within, but Durja Singh was a man of courage and resource, and speedily assembled his surprised garrison. The great wooden gates were swung to and barred, torches flared on the battlements, and men ran backwards and forwards preparing for the defence.

Their appearance was greeted by a shower of arrows from the bows of the trusty Bhils, and under the cover of their unerring markmanship, Tej Singh led his men up the steep pathway, which was the only entrance to the fortress, every other side being impregnable.

Undaunted by the arrows and rocks with which they were greeted by the defenders, the attacking party went steadily on, though many a one fell, hit from above.

'The gates! the gates,' commanded Tej Singh, and even as he spoke, the defenders rushed to hold them. But Devi Singh with his band of Rathors was up, and with their great maces they proceeded to batter down the main defences of the fort.

With a crash, one of the great gates fell, and Tej Singh sprang forward with his men, while Devi Singh gave way to allow the young Rathor right of entry, but quick as he was, someone, was before him—old Gokuldas, who with the cry of 'Hara! Hara!' went by him like a flash.

Inside the gates a strong band of Chandrawats barred the way, with Durja Singh himself at their head. So terrific was the impact, that the Rathors were forced back, but Devi Singh shouted, 'Forward! Forward! No Rathor falls back living by me.' Stung by the taunt, the Rathors hurled themselves with increased fury against the Chandrawats pressing them back and causing them to fly in disorder, but even in the moment of victory, Devi Singh's men saw their own gallant Chief fall, mortally wounded by the lance of Durja Singh.

'Forward, men of the Rathors,' he cried faintly, then 'Chandan, my son!' and died.

The Rathors surged forward, and Durja Singh, bleeding from a dozen wounds and his sword broken, stood a prisoner.

'On the pain of death let no man harm the Chief,' commanded Tej Singh, who was the soul of generous chivalry towards his captured foe.

Amazed, his men stood round the captive, when suddenly old Gokuldas rushed by, and with a swift movement towards Tej Singh said, 'Chief! forgive me that I disobey your command, Behold the murderer of my son!' and with a yell, he leapt upon Durja Singh, and bearing him to the

ground plunged his lance into the Chief's breast, but even as he was pierced, Durja Singh swung his mighty mace and bringing it down with a superhuman effort, shattered the skull of his assailant and fell dead across his body.

* * * * *

The sun rose over the tops of the Aravali, gilding the turrets and pinnacles of Surya Mahal, over which the banner of the Rathor Chief waved proudly.

Peace reigned in Mewar, and in the green fields men tended their crops, and once more there sounded the sweet pipe of the shepherd as he watched his flocks and herds.

Not long after Tej Singh the Rathor no longer an exile but an honoured Chief, brought back his bride to Surya Mahal.

His vassals blessed the day when the son of Tilak Singh came back to rule over them in his father's stead.

His marriage had been celebrated with the greatest magnificence, under the patronage of the Maharana and his Queen, for the loyalty and valour of Tej Singh and the sweetness of Pushpkumari had endeared them both to the royal pair.

'It was you who taught the Charan his song!' said Pushpkumari when once more they sat upon the battlements of Surya Mahal.

'It was the Charan who taught his song to me!' replied Tej Singh, to tease her.

But Pushpkumari laughed happily, 'Chief or Charan, it was always the same Tej Singh, to whom I plighted my troth.'

Then he showed her the two little bracelets which she had woven for him. 'But they are withered,' said the bride, 'I will make you fresh ones.'

'I will keep these still,' he replied, 'to remind me of your beautiful fidelity.'

The night fell. Below in the citadel the people were keeping up the marriage festival. The ground was strewn with flowers, and the sky with stars.

And a great peace enveloped the ancient walls of Surya Mahal, for the Rathor had come home.

EPILOGUE

'For Mewar'

The great Maharana lay dying. All those he loved were round him. The loyal men who had followed him in adversity and into exile had come to watch with him in his last hour.

By his side sat his son, Amar Singh. He had sworn to his dying father that he would never make common cause with the Mogul, and that so long as he could wield sword or lead a charge Mewar should remain a free land.

One by one, sadly, proudly, the warriors took their leave of their great Chief, for they knew he wished to be alone.

Alone he had begun his crusade, alone he should finish it.

His wife and son sat by him, silent in grief. Down the face of the Queen, slow tears fell unheeded; she knew the end was near.

With an effort the dying Prince turned his eyes to where the long line of the Aravali lay bathed in a glory of red and gold. The sun was setting, and Pratap Singh watched it for the last time.

A faint smile passed over the still face, and his lips moved.

'Jai Bhagwan Eklingji,' he said in a clear loud voice.

It was the battle cry of the Sesodias, and with the noble challenge on his lips he died.

Then they drew the curtain round him, while the great drums in the court below carried the mournful tidings across the plains of Rajasthan, and men and women with one accord bowed their heads to the sacred memory of the great Maharana who had died as he had lived, for Mewar.

